

**CHUCK
KLOSTERMAN
ON
MEDIA
AND
CULTURE**





Chuck Klosterman on Media and Culture

A Collection of Previously Published Essays

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Ten Seconds to Love

“Merry Christmas, Juggalo.”

This is what he scrawled on the card, a little one-flap piece of construction paper featuring a picture of a Clydesdale standing next to a snow-capped conifer. It was attached to a Fuji videotape and handed to me in my favorite bar. I immediately knew what it was. “Thanks, Ninja,” I replied to the dashing twenty-four-year-old doctor who gave it to me. “You are my stone cold elf.” My doctor friend returned to his dart game; I proceeded to have four more drinks while listening to Dean Martin on the jukebox before getting into my car and driving home, traversing the empty, frozen streets of downtown Fargo. Winter nights in urban North Dakota are fascinating, because they resemble overcast summer afternoons: The painfully white snow has such a high albedo that it reflects the glow from streetlights with a remarkable intensity. You can drive without headlights at midnight, which is exactly what I did. It was beautiful. “I love Christmas,” I thought to myself when I arrived home from Duffy’s Tavern, just drunk enough to wrap myself in a terry-cloth robe and watch Pamela Anderson perform oral sex on Tommy Lee.

Every holiday season, I rewatch my illegally dubbed Pamela Tommy sex tape. It’s sort of my version of *It’s a Wonderful Life*. There is no thrill in seeing it anymore, and certainly no prurient rush: It is probably the least arousing videotape I own, with the possible exception of *Walking with Dinosaurs*. However, it’s also the only “important” videotape I own, and it’s important because it shows how unsexy oral sex can represent what we want as a society (or maybe what we’re afraid to want). Everyone is willing to classify Pamela Anderson as a bimbo and a whore and an idealized version of why half the women in America loathe their bodies, and all of that might be true—but what nobody seems willing to admit is that she’s the most crucial woman of her generation, partially because we hate to think about what Pam Anderson’s heaving bosom means to our culture.

People freak out whenever you attempt to compare Anderson to Marilyn Monroe. In fact, I used to freak out when others have made that comparison, even though I had no idea why. I was unironically watching

the E! network a few years back, and some forgettable bozo kept insisting that Pamela was a Marilyn for the nineties (this was either a retrospective on *Baywatch* or a promotional special for *V.I.P.*, but I can't remember which). Somehow, this bozo's assertion made me vaguely angry, which is how I used to react whenever someone claimed Metallica was my generation's Led Zeppelin.

My desire to protect Marilyn Monroe is inexplicable; I have no idea why I would feel territorial about the legacy of a woman who died ten years before I was born. Marilyn died young and lonely, so (I suppose) it's impossible not to feel a certain sense of compassion for her—but it's also hard to imagine anyone who benefited more from an early death. James Dean comes close, but it's entirely possible he might have made a handful of good films in his forties, and beyond; it's unlikely Monroe could have had any long-term career. Film revisionists have taken to insisting she was an underrated actress (mostly because of *Some Like It Hot*, *Bus Stop*, and *Niagara*), but it's actually the other way around: So many people have retrospectively declared her acting to be “underrated” that she's become *overrated*, simply because she didn't make enough important films to vindicate her advocates' claims.

However, Monroe was the most significant female figure of the middle twentieth century (cinematically or otherwise), and that had almost nothing to do with acting. Both physically and philosophically, Norma Jean was the incarnation of the early fifties sexual archetype. And ironically, that's why that forgettable bozo on E! was right when he compared Monroe to Pamela Anderson, even though he'd never be able to explain why. Pam *is* the contemporary Marilyn Monroe, inadvertently illustrating which aspects of human desire can evolve (and which aspects never will).

I can't seem to find a definitive source for Anderson's physical dimensions. The numbers once ran at 36–24–34, but those obviously changed after her 1999 breast reduction. Her height is listed as either five-foot-seven or five-foot-five (although—oddly—never five-foot-six), and her weight is generally placed at 107 pounds. She has what women refer to as an “impossible body,” a claim that's only partially contradicted by the fact that her body actually exists. There are scientists (goofball sociobiologists, mostly, and also Desmond Morris) who argue that men are visually (and one assumes unconsciously) attracted to the “two-thirds ratio” in nature, which is why the cliché dimensions for ideal women somehow

became 36–24–36. Man’s affinity for this ratio supposedly shows up in everything he creates—architecture, auto chassis, the circumference of an Absolut vodka bottle in relation to its height, etc., etc., etc. This is an interesting theory, especially since it would seem to explain why male artists in the sixteenth century were attracted to obese women (one could argue that they were interested in the same 2/3 body ratio and simply inverted the modern-day proportions). Of course, this is a very male-centric theory to advocate: Guys would love to somehow prove they want to have sex with Pamela Anderson because of *math*.

Still, I can’t help but partially believe in this hypothesis, probably because I’m secretly ashamed to be attracted to Pamela Anderson. Somehow, it makes me feel stupid. It’s almost like desiring Pam Anderson is like admitting that—sexually—you have no creativity. I would feel much better about myself if I would prefer to go down on Kim Deal or Ellen Barkin. I would somehow feel smarter if what I wanted was even just a model with a mantis-like skeleton body, like Kate Moss. I profoundly prefer to be turned on by any woman who looks vaguely fucked-up; that’s much more intellectually satisfying. And I know dozens of men who have completely talked themselves into this way of thinking, so much so that they don’t even realize they’re overcompensating; these are the same people who insist they prefer Mary Ann to Ginger. In fact, I once worked with a guy who told me that he thinks Pamela Anderson is a fundamentally ugly, plastic woman who’s “antisexy.” His claim is that it’s not just that Anderson doesn’t excite him—she actually makes him want to recoil. And every woman in our office seemed to like him more after he said that.

What I’ve come to realize is that a remarkably high percentage of everyday citizens—and this applies to both men and women—actively despise Pam Anderson. Moreover, their dislike for this woman is a completely conscious decision: They’ve decided to hate Anderson on principle. But what they really hate is the modern world; what they hate is that Pamela Anderson is the incarnation of the perfect, idealized icon we all sort of concede is supposed to be impossible. We’ve established this unrealistic image of what we want from the human race, but it angers people to see that image in real life. It sort of shows why most Americans hate themselves.

Every so often I stumble across *The Man Show* on Comedy Central, a program where two semi-charming jerks insist that men are brilliant

because men are idiots.¹ It's the apex of that whole "we men are magnificent bastards" movement that began in roughly 1992—I think Tim Allen probably spawned it—and it suggests that true guys can only like beer and football and pork ribs and strippers. Now, granted—these *are* things that many men genuinely adore—but not in the rote, unilaterally Sasquatchian manner this kind of shtick always implies. A program like *The Man Show* is legitimately negative for society, but not because it's misogynistic; *The Man Show* is socially negative because it actively tries to prove an inaccurate hypothesis that too many women already believe: The premise of *The Man Show* is that all men think exactly the same way. And that consensus makes it difficult to write about Pam Anderson, because everyone assumes you're just a perv who adores tits. And that's not true (at least not for me). In truth, you can adore tits *and* you can love Pamela Anderson—and without necessarily associating the former with the latter.

Am I physically attracted to Pamela Anderson? Of course. But the more I see her, the more I realize I'm not looking at a person I'd like to sleep with; I'm looking at America. And I'm sure a lot of guys who masturbated to black-and-white photos of Marilyn Monroe during the Korean conflict had the same experience, even though they probably didn't think about it in those terms.

Answer this question. Let's say you were given two options: You can either (a) have sex with the world's most attractive person, but you can tell no one and no one will ever know, or (b) you can walk through life with that person hand-in-hand, creating the illusion to everyone alive that this individual is your lover—even though you will never so much as kiss.

Which would you pick?

If you're like most people, your immediate gut reaction is to take option "a." Everyone seems to say this at first blush, mostly because we all want to imagine ourselves as visceral beings (this is especially true of men, who *always* pick "a" immediately). However, if you keep talking to someone about this question, and you start pointing out the specifics of what these two scenarios mean, you'll find that everybody eventually admits that the second alternative would be more satisfying. And this query always makes me think about Marilyn Monroe and her 1954 marriage to Joe DiMaggio.

Despite lasting only nine months, the Monroe-DiMaggio union was probably the most perfect marriage in American history. In a way, it seemed like an example of how life is supposed to work: The sexiest, most

desirable woman on the planet fell in love with the coolest, most beloved stud of the Greatest Generation. Yet this marriage was doomed; in fact, my suspicion is that the relationship was even more of a nightmare than we know. The more we learn about DiMaggio, the more he seems like a cold, sullen badass who was always alone (even in a roomful of people).² And as for Marilyn... well, she personifies every beautiful/crazy/sexy/suicidal woman I've ever met (and you know the type of person I'm referring to—this is the kind of girl who's depressed by the irrational notion that men only want her for her physical appearance but who still cannot shake the equally irrational fear that she is somehow overweight and repulsive). I am certain that having sex with Marilyn Monroe was four minutes of ecstasy followed by five hours of frustration. This is one of the reasons why DiMaggio couldn't make his marriage work, yet still felt compelled to decorate her crypt with roses for the next four decades. Remember that question I posed two paragraphs ago? Joltin' Joe is just about the only man in history who faced this hypothetical *for real* and somehow picked *both* options. And it's that second option—the lonely, painful option “b”—that matters metaphorically. What's compelling about the idea of the Monroe-DiMaggio relationship—and the Monroe-Arthur Miller relationship, and the Monroe-JFK relationship—is not the idea of them being together. It's the idea of them not being together. It's the hollow reality of things not working out. It's about Monroe being unattainable to everyone—world-class athletes, brilliant playwrights, and the only movie star president of the twentieth century. She was above them all.

Oh, I know: Every one of those guys had sex with Marilyn, so it's kind of a naive notion to think of her as pure. But it's not so much that Monroe seemed virginal; it's more like she seemed too overtly sexual to actually participate in the unseemly process of intercourse. Trying to picture Norma Jean (ahem) “getting her freak on” is like trying to imagine Bruce Lee getting into a bar fight: Even in my mind, I can't conceive anything that doesn't seem like cinema. It's impossible to think of Monroe having sex like a normal person. I always imagine a breeze blowing the curtains over the bedpost, and all her naughty bits are hidden; her hair is perfect, and she's sorta smiling with her eyes half closed. It's even PG-13 *in my brain*. Norman Mailer used to tell a (possibly) apocryphal story that claims—upon signing her first lucrative contract with Twentieth Century Fox—Monroe sardonically said, “Well, that's the last cock I eat.” I really hate that story,

even if it's true. Marilyn Monroe is the definition of the old-school American sex symbol, and part of that definition is that it's unfathomable to picture her giving anyone a blow job.

Conversely, it is not particularly difficult to envision Pamela Anderson doing this. It's actually happening on the TV in my living room as I type this very sentence.³ But what's weird is that my ability to experience Pam enjoying an act I can't even imagine Marilyn performing is not an illustration of how they are different; it somehow makes them more alike. And I think this is because we all unconsciously identify iconic figures with whatever social philosophy they represent (I suppose this is what makes them "iconic"). Monroe and Anderson might suggest totally different worldviews, but they both seem like victims. They're both sexually tragic figures. Looking at the life of Pam Anderson in the present tense tells us as much about ourselves as looking back on Marilyn Monroe tells us about our fathers and mothers.

Monroe's men were generally the kind of people I wanted to be until I turned about fourteen: a great athlete, a president, a writer, etc. Anderson's men are the kind of people I want to be whenever I watch documentaries about KISS. But both Marilyn and Pam desired what their world valued: Men in the fifties wanted Monroe because she made love to the men they respected; modern men want Anderson because she makes love to the concept of celebrity.

There's no way the modern-day version of Marilyn could date the modern-day version of DiMaggio. Today, there is too much of a chasm between sexuality and "classic greatness." DiMaggio wasn't necessarily the finest baseball player on the planet in a technical sense, but he was always the *greatest* player, inasmuch as he defined what was beautiful and noble about the art of the game. He was classically great. Even when Ted Williams was hitting better than Joe, Ted was only striking a leather projectile with a wooden stick; DiMaggio was defining what Americans loved about democracy. Through the 1990s, the closest thing there was to a DiMaggio-esque figure was Michael Jordan; M.J. is the DiMaggio of his age, just as Pam is the Marilyn of hers. But it goes without saying that Michael Jordan could never date Pamela Anderson. That would cause the apocalypse.

If Jordan dated Pamela Anderson, it would destroy him. He'd still be remembered as the greatest two-guard who ever lived, but his iconography

would never be the same. In the eyes of people who obsess over celebrities without really thinking about why they care—in other words, in the eyes of 90 percent of America—Jordan would be dating a slut. It would be like the rich, big-toothed high school quarterback showing up at the prom with a Goth chick who'd dropped out of community college to buy a used IROC. America's greatest athletes can no longer date America's greatest sex symbols unless said athletes are willing to become freaks (case in point: José Canseco and Dennis Rodman). But back in Monroe's day, it was normal for vixens to date dashing sports stars; Jane Russell was married to Bob Waterfield, and they slept in a Murphy bed in downtown Cleveland. That seemed normal and kind of sweet. Today, that would seem unnatural (and not just because of the Murphy bed). There are a few exceptions, but none of them matter. Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter used to date Mariah Carey, but nobody cared; she's crazy and he's not crazy enough. Chris Webber hits it with Tyra Banks, but C-Webb refuses to talk about it and T-Banks evidently can't speak. Canadian hoopster Steve Nash supposedly dated Elizabeth Hurley, but she's about ten times more famous than he is, even in Canada.⁴

The reason Pam Anderson can't date M.J. is because being the modern Monroe means there is nothing understated about your sexuality. At all. That's what I mean when I say the gap between sexuality and classic greatness has expanded beyond recognition; there is something inherently understated about the term *classical*, and there's obviously nothing understated about Pammy. Sleeping with Pam would destroy Jordan's ethos; you can't be the hero to an eight-year-old boy in Duluth *and* the paramour to 107-pound public orgasmatron. But the larger problem is that dating the Michael Jordans of the world is not part of Pam Anderson's job description. Since Pam is the hyperaccelerated manifestation of contemporary sexuality, she is socially obligated to deliver her most intimate gifts to those who represent contemporary America. That's what Marilyn did; she gave her body to the post-World War II archetypes of sport, art, and politics. She was the lover of—at least *for*—classic greatness. Pam's in the same position, but she has to be the lover of postmodern greatness. That's why we all had to watch her give a blow job to the drummer from Mötley Crüe.

The newfangled postmodern sex goddess can't just sleep with a cool guy; she needs to sleep with the entire "concept" of celebrity. For people born in

the seventies and eighties, the “concept” of celebrity has replaced people like Joe DiMaggio. On the surface, this probably seems paradoxical, since DiMaggio *was* a celebrity. But DiMaggio was a celebrity when “celebrity” wasn’t a concept; it was merely a designation. If you asked anyone in 1951 why DiMaggio was a celebrity (or even if you asked someone that question today), they could undoubtedly give a satisfactory answer. However, it’s impossible to explain why Tommy Lee is a celebrity. You can’t say “because he’s a rock star,” because he’s not; the last record Tommy Lee made that lots of people liked was *Dr. Feelgood*, which came out in 1989. Yet Tommy is far more famous now than he was in 1989, and it’s because he’s directed his energy into being a celebrity in the conceptual sense. He is famous for being famous, and for behaving famously, and for taking drugs, and for having his relationship with Pam Anderson available on the pay-per-view menu of most hotels (which makes him *more* famous, but which only happened because he *was* famous). And he is exactly the type of man Pam Anderson should be with. This is not a criticism of Pam or a backhanded compliment to Tommy; it’s just sort of true.

Pam is the embodiment of modern female sexuality, and that embodiment is a Barbie Doll. But that’s not necessarily bad; it’s what intellectual men want (because she can be appreciated lecherously *and* ironically), and it’s what intellectual women want (because it provides the opportunity to rail against Barbie dolls). She’s an intellectual symbol of what every forward-thinking feminist has warned us about, and she’s a physical symbol of all the things men find alluring (some of which are rudimentary, some of which are complex). Society’s relationship with Pam Anderson is exactly like its former relationship with Monroe. What’s different is how they respond back.

Ultimately, both women serve the same role, and that role is both shallow and profound. People use Monroe and Anderson as a kind of cultural shorthand for understanding the most important sexual mores of entire generations. Marilyn and Pam succeed in that capacity because they’re *not* complicated; they’re sexual for reasons that are *only* about sex. Everything else just muddles the equation. I mean, there’s probably never been a sexier woman than Elizabeth Taylor in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but that wasn’t just because she looked incredible—that was “acting.” She made herself sexier. Monroe never needed to act. In a sense, Taylor was too complex to be an icon of this magnitude. The same thing happened to former MTV

personality Jenny McCarthy, a peer of Anderson's, who—for roughly seven weeks in the summer of 1995—was everyone's Woman of the Moment. But her problem was that she became too normal; McCarthy seemed completely aware of who she was and what her breasts could be extrapolated to say about society. That self-awareness killed her career. At this point, Jenny McCarthy is a likable bombshell who's only slightly more interesting than a bucket of shark chum. She could have been a supernatural pictogram of the new sensuality, but elected to merely become a "person."

Not Pammy, though. She's never been a person, and I'm glad. Pam doesn't just have sex with guys; Pam fucks reality. As I type this, she has divorced Lee and is involved with mook musician Kid Rock.⁵ Here again, Pam has made the perfect romantic decision. Here's a guy who actually named himself after youth and rock 'n' roll. Here's a guy who openly aspires to be the new David Lee Roth. Here's a guy who operates within the idiom of rap metal, an art form that critics despise and normal people adore. Here's an underrated antigenius who represents the redneck renaissance and what's great about music, pot, and popular culture (and, I suppose, America). Kid Rock's not a person either. I sure hope those crazy kids make it!

My eyes have drifted back to my TV just now, and I spent a few moments looking at Tommy Lee's penis. I realize this is no brilliant insight, but Tommy Lee's genitalia is stupidly huge. In the scene I'm watching right now, he appears to be beating his penis against the steering wheel of a boat. It's oddly reassuring. In fact, it's making me think about Joe DiMaggio again: DiMaggio used his 36-inch, 36-ounce bat to hit safely in fifty-six straight games, and Tommy used his 10-inch, 13-ounce bat⁶ to hit Heather Locklear, Bobbi Brown, and the single-most important woman of our times. World-class sex kittens no longer date sports heroes because modern sports heroes have joined heavy metal bands. Tommy Lee is our "Joltin' Joe." Most of the guys I know would much rather have sex with three of the world's most beautiful women than hit .325 career against American League pitching. Now, it's possible this was always the case (perhaps young men in 1953 felt the same way). But the difference is that admitting that choice in the 1950s meant you were profoundly honest and a little pathetic. In the twenty-first century, it still means you're pathetic, but that's considered normal.

That's the weird irony that makes Pam Anderson so essential to our times: She's not a real person, but she's still more real than any sexual icon we've ever had. Pam Anderson is a mainstream, nonsubversive porn star who actually does all the dirty things her disciples fantasize about. Marilyn Monroe was the perfect vessel for an age where it was wrong to want wild, easy sex; Pam is the perfect vessel in an age where not wanting wild, easy sex makes you a puritanical, born-again weirdo. It's not enough just to talk like Mae West. Anybody can do that. *We need proof.* Pam has the proof. In the short-term, the Tommy-Pamela videotape sullied her already sketchy reputation. But it was probably the greatest thing that could have happened to her long-term legacy—it made her transcendent and organic in the same breath.

Whenever I hear intellectuals talk about sexual icons of the present day, the name mentioned most is Madonna. That seems like a good answer, and it's the kind of answer Madonna has worked very hard to perpetuate. Earning that title was her only career goal. But Madonna's not even close to representing contemporary sexuality in any important fashion. She tries way too hard, and it never seems honest. It's very telling that the two best songs in Madonna's catalog—"Like a Virgin" and "Like a Prayer"—are titled after similes. Her whole career is a collection of similes: Madonna is *like* a sexual idol, but that's just the plot for her self-styled promotional blitz. When she overtly attempted to embody Marilyn Monroe in the video for "Material Girl," Madonna got the dance steps perfect but completely missed the message: That song suggests that sex is about money, and that sex is about power, and that sex is about getting what you want. Well, fine. That's how it is with Madonna. But with the original Monroe, sex was about sex. It was completely without guile or intellect. Being a sexual icon is sort of like being the frontman for an Orange County punk band: As soon as you can explain why you're necessary, you're over.

Madonna is an unsuccessful sexual icon because she desperately wants to be a sexual icon. Pamela Anderson is the perfect sexual icon because she wants to have sex. You think that makes her dumb? Well, maybe you're right. But how smart are *you* while you're having sex? What part of sex is "intellectual"? Certainly none of the good parts.

There are a lot of interesting moments on my Pam 'n' Tommy Fuji videotape, several of which are so weird that its authenticity can't be doubted. Pam and Tommy listen to MC Hammer and Soul Asylum. They

try to write a cookbook for dope smokers. Tommy uses the word *rad* in casual conversation. Pam tells Tommy, “You’re the best fucking husband on the planet,” and they get married with the aid of a spaceman. But if you had a transcript of this film, you’d find that there’s one phrase that appears more often than all others: “*Where are we?*”

This question is asked over twenty times, and it’s never answered. They’re on a boat, they look at the horizon, and they say, “Where are we?” And if someone wanted to use Pam as a metaphor for the decline of American morality and the vapidness of modern relationships, they could point out that phrase as an illuminating example of a lost generation. “Where are we, indeed,” such a critic might write in the last paragraph of an essay. But that kind of snarkiness is more negative than necessary, and it misses the point. We don’t need Pam to know where she is; she helps us understand where we are.

1. It’s possible that *The Man Show* might be off the air by the time this book is released, mostly because Jimmy Kimmel seems like something of a rising cultural force. Of course, it’s entirely plausible that Comedy Central would replace *The Man Show* with an innovative new series featuring two guys sitting in a beer garden each week and comparing their wives’ vaginas to that of a Hereford heifer.

2. Although the fact that he never missed a cut-off man in his entire career somehow makes this seem acceptable.

3. And—as I mentioned earlier—it’s surprisingly unsexy (it’s sort of like watching that cow get butchered at the end of *Apocalypse Now*).

4. However, you gotta give Steve Nash this: On December 11, 2001, Nash scored 39 points against the Portland Trail Blazers on 12 of 16 shooting. He scored 17 points over the final 6:23 of regulation, including two free throws with 3.9 seconds remaining that gave Dallas the win. And then he went back to his hotel room AND PROBABLY HAD SEX WITH ELIZABETH HURLEY. Nice night, dude.

5. And here’s something you only notice if you’re as obsessive as I am: Kid Rock likes to mention in interviews how he hates Radiohead; in his video for “You Never Met a Motherf**ker Quite Like Me,” he actually wipes his arse with toilet paper that has the word *Radiohead* embossed on every tissue. On the surface, that might seem like a statement against pretension and elitism, almost as if Rock is saying he’s the anti-Thom Yorke. However, it actually has to do with Mötley Crüe. On page 358 of the

Crüe biography *The Dirt*, Tommy Lee mentions that Pamela threw a massive birthday party for him when he turned thirty-three, and Lee says she “cranked our favorite band, Radiohead, on the sound system.” I have no doubt that Pam has told Kid how she and Tommy used to adore *OK Computer*, and it drives him crazy. Kid Rock hates Radiohead for the same reason I hate Coldplay.

[6](#). Approximate.

Porn

When exactly did every housewife in America become a whore?¹

Now, this is not an attack on housewives. I can't say I *support* the idea of every housewife in America being a whore, but I suppose things could be worse; a loose army of housewife whores is obviously preferable to 2 million housewife serial killers, or 3 million housewife crackheads, or 10 million housewife crossbow enthusiasts. Still, the fact that we have so many whorific housewives is mildly unsettling and profoundly inexplicable. It's hard to wrap your mind around the motivations of a forty-four-year-old mother smiling while someone takes a series of photographs that prominently feature her birth canal.

Yet according to the affable robots at google.com, there are 6,250 sites on the Internet that prominently include the phrase "naked housewives." There are also 7,110 that include the phrase "nude housewives," which I suppose is technically classier. We have 586 that promote "housewife whores," while a solid 2,600 offer a more generic alternative ("housewife sluts"). I could only find 51 that contain the phrase "my wife is a whore," although that number is somewhat offset by the 6 sites specifically promoting that "my wife is a *fucking* whore," not to mention the semiofficial domain name housewifewhore.com. Since one can assume all of these sites have—conservatively—50 whores apiece, that's a little over 830,000 domestic sexaholics in English-speaking countries alone, all of which can be located in roughly ninety seconds.

Considering how few women are still stay-at-home moms, that's quite an accomplishment.

Everyone knows that the Internet is changing our lives, mostly because someone in the media has uttered that exact phrase every single day since 1993. However, it certainly appears that the main thing the Internet has accomplished is the normalization of amateur pornography. There is no justification for the amount of naked people on the World Wide Web, many of whom are clearly (clearly!) doing so for non-monetary reasons. Where were all these people fifteen years ago? Were there really millions of women in 1986 turning to their husbands and saying, "You know, I would

love to have total strangers masturbate to images of me deep-throating a titanium dildo, but there's simply no medium for that kind of entertainment. I guess we'll just have to sit here and watch *Falcon Crest* again."

This phenomenon blows my mind, but—apparently—nobody else is the least bit surprised. It has been my experience that people who are especially obsessed with Internet technology (HTML designers, "new media" pundits, *Lord of the Rings* fans, etc.) tend to become extremely agitated when you start to talk about Internet pornography, typically because they think that it degrades the social import of the Web and insults all the bespectacled geniuses who create it.² The argument they make in response is usually something along the lines of this: "Okay, sure—there's porn on the Internet. But who cares? There are some perverts on computers who spend all day looking at Teri Hatcher's ass, but there are just as many perverts in public libraries looking at medical journals and playing with themselves under the table. You wouldn't judge the merits of literature by the actions of those losers, and it's equally shortsighted to study the Internet through the prism of its lowest common denominator. People who obsess about Internet porn are missing the point."

The first time I heard that argument, it seemed savvy. However, I've grown to realize that the opposite is true. People who *aren't* obsessing about Internet porn are missing the point, because that sleaze was the catalyst for everything else. I doubt that pornography has been good for the advancement of society, but I suspect it's done wonders for the advancement of computer technology.

People always forget how new the Internet truly is. I was a senior in college during the spring of 1994, and I knew exactly two people who had e-mail addresses. They wrote e-mails *to each other*. It seemed completely impractical and a total waste of time. From what I could tell, the only people who were sending e-mail were people who drank Zima, and they mostly used the Internet to discuss properties of calculus or to send Steven Wright jokes to other weirdos in Canada. They were mostly CompuServe users. I can recall an extremely antisocial MC Hammer fan in my dormitory who had a Macintosh in his room and once tied up the phone line for five hours while he downloaded the Batman logo for no apparent reason; soon after, he unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of Ibuprofen. This did not seem like the future.

However, I can also vividly recall my friend Robert showing me something in the fall of 1994 that seemed legitimately amazing—and while it didn't prompt me to get an e-mail address, it did reinvent my image of how prevalent the Internet was going to become. Robert had always been a ground-floor computer nerd, and I asked him if there truly was an avalanche of porn online (which was something I had read about in the newspaper). Robert said, "I could show you lesbians having sex in two seconds." Now, I assumed he meant "two seconds" figuratively, as in "I just have to wash my hair and put on my makeup—I'll be ready to go in two seconds." Obviously, I was wrong. Robert meant two seconds as in 00:02. And the actual image of two vacant blond girls with serpentine tongues was not nearly as mind-blowing as the fact that *someone* has designed a hypercomplicated network to show me lesbian smut. I could not fathom why this technology—for *this particular purpose*—would even exist.

Almost a decade later, I still sort of feel that way. Internet porn has replaced going to the moon as the explanation for all that is unexplainable. Here's what I mean by that: People used to ask rhetorical questions like, "How is it that we can put a man on the moon, but I still can't get a good martini in downtown Seattle?" Neil Armstrong made everything less complicated than a lunar landing seem plausible. Meanwhile, Internet porn makes everything more reasonable—once you've realized there is a massive subculture of upwardly mobile people who think it's erotic to see an Asian woman giving a hand job to a javelina, nothing else in the world seems crazy.

We all like to talk about how the Internet is such a groundbreaking educational tool, but we're missing what it can teach us about ourselves. Porn sites are the window to the modern soul; they're glimpses into the twisted minds of a faceless society. All the deviancy Freud tried to deduce through decades of analysis is now completely exposed in seconds (or milliseconds, if you have DSL). When Carl Jung introduced the concept of the "collective unconscious," he was trying to explain why all humans are inherently scared of things like darkness and vampires—but net porn is the collective conscious. It's where we all see the things people would never admit to wanting.

And what is it that we want? From what I can tell, that answer is twofold: We want imperfection, and we want heightened reality. The pornography everyone wants to see on the Internet focuses on (a) amateurs and (b)

celebrities. We either want a truck stop waitress who's a little overweight and sort of freakish, or we want voyeuristic shots of Britney Love Aguilera³ on a private beach in Italy. And some would say that's simply human nature, but they're wrong; that's a reflection of how we're still trying to understand how this technology works. Ironically—or perhaps predictably—we need porn to do this. It's what keeps us interested.

Let's say a guy is sitting in a bar in Des Moines and two women walk in. One of these girls is clearly a model/actress, and she has fake boobs and luxurious hair and a perfectly sculpted body; meanwhile, her companion is just a totally normal, decentlooking person. Who will our hard-drinking Iowan immediately want to see naked? The answer is obvious—he would want to see the model. And if there are twenty-five women in the bar that night and he's given the opportunity to see any one of them nude, he will pick whoever he thinks is the most attractive. Yet this would not be the case if these women were 2-D thumbnail pics on a Web site called *nakedtavern.com*. The first female selected would be whoever seemed the *most* normal (i.e., neither ideal nor repulsive), or maybe the woman with the nicest smile who seemed just a tier below gorgeous. And porn sites are completely aware of this phenomenon. You often see banner advertisements that scream things like, TIRED OF SITES WITH MODELS CLAIMING TO BE AMATEURS? WE GUARANTEE REAL UNPROFESSIONAL SLUTS! This is one of those bizarre paradoxes that could only have been created by the acceleration of culture: Within the realm of their Gateways, men prefer to look at nude images of women they'd normally ignore in real life.

Now, I realize phrases like “the acceleration of culture” tend to be frustrating terms, mostly because there's a certain segment of the population that throws around this term too often (and usually incorrectly), and there's another segment that only vaguely understands what it means (they can define the individual words, but the larger concept still seems fuzzy). However, it's the best explanation as to why amateur porn is more popular than professional porn, which is only the case in the on-line idiom. Before the Net devastated the smut mag industry, success had always been directly tied to professionalism: In the 1990s, *Playboy* was forever the front-runner, followed by *Penthouse*, followed by *Hustler*, followed by *Perfect 10*. The same still goes for live erotica: Whenever I hear guys talking about their favorite strip clubs, they always talk about how unbelievably hot the

dancers are; I've never heard anyone raving about how unbelievably ordinary the dancers look. Yet with computer pornography (much of which is still free), the key is normalcy—the surfer is hoping to see the girl next door in an almost literal sense. This is the product of a technology that has accelerated faster than its user can comprehend.

In less than a decade, millions of Americans went from (1) not knowing what the Internet was, to (2) knowing what it was but not using it, to (3) having an e-mail address, to (4) using e-mail pretty much every day, to (5) being unable to exist professionally *or socially* without it. For 98 percent of the world, the speed and sweep of that evolution was too great to fathom. Consequently, we learned how to use tools most of us don't understand. This has always been the case with technology, but not quite to this extent. I mean, I drive a car that I can't fix and that I could certainly never build, but I still understand how it works in a way that goes (slightly) beyond the theoretical. I could explain how a car works to a ten-year-old. Conversely, I don't understand *anything* about the construction of the Internet, beyond those conventional *Newsweek* factoids that everyone knows (and which still seem borderline impossible). I have no practical knowledge of the "information superhighway."⁴ And I'm not interested in how it works; I just want to feel like I vaguely grasp its potential and vaguely understand how to use that potential to my advantage.

This is why amateur pornography became so integral to the adoption of Internet technology: It not only made people *excited* about using the Web (because sex is prurient and arousing), but it also made people *comfortable* with using the Web (because it's organic and unsophisticated). Sex is so undeniably visceral that anyone can relate to it, assuming what they're seeing does not appear to be an untouchable, unworldly fantasy. Imperfect, unpaid nudity tightened the parameters of the virtual world; it's proof that this futuristic electronic network is still operated by humankind. This is not a pixelated construction of some Never-Neverland character from *Tron*; this is some girl you saw at Pizza Hut. Amateur pornography grounds us in our reality.

Of course, it should go without saying that our reality is profoundly fucked-up. Twenty minutes on the Internet cum trade is all it takes to realize that the sexual peccadilloes of modern people are clichéd, sad, incomprehensible, and/or a combination of all three. If you are to take "real" porn at face value, you would be forced to conclude that women

rarely have pubic hair, except for those who are advertising as having *more* pubic hair than normal. There seems to be an unabated demand for naked teenage girls, although there also seems to be a tacit understanding that any moderately small-breasted thirty-one-year-old woman can pass for a teenager if she has pigtails and a lollipop. There is an inordinate amount of bandwidth focused on girls urinating on themselves and/or licking their own nipples (is this fun?), and there's a big demand for interracial sex, first-time anal sex, public flashing, and the ham-fisted implication of incest. What's most disturbing is the amount of Internet porn that has absolutely nothing to do with sexual desire and everything to do with cartoonish misogyny, most notably the endless sites showing men ejaculating on women's faces while the recipients pretend to enjoy it; this has about as much to do with sex as hitting someone in the face with a frying pan.

And—of course—there is also a pocket of men who masturbate to images of women getting hit in the face with frying pans. I guess there's no accounting for taste. But there's really no purpose in complaining about pornography, either. Yes, it's socially negative; no, it's not nearly as negative as Ted Bundy claimed before his execution. The tangible effect of pornography is roughly the same as the tangible effect of Ozzy Osbourne's music on stoned Midwestern teenagers: It prompts a small faction of idiots to consider idiotic impulses, which is why we have the word *idiocy*. Arguing about the psychological merits (or lack thereof) of watching intercourse on a Presario 700Z doesn't interest me. What interests me is how that habit changes the way people think about their own existence—and that brings me back to that second type of image porn surfers want to see: naked celebrities.

You'd think naked Hollywood actresses and naked West Virginia hairdressers would exist on opposite poles, but they're closer than you think. They're closer because—in a technical, physiological sense—they're identical. There are certainly differences between the nipples of Alyssa Milano and the nipples of an Olive Garden waitress in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, but the similarities of those nipples greatly outweigh the disparities. Here again, Internet pornography provides a bizarre sense of stability; it reminds us that we're working in a hard reality; naked from the neck down, your wife and Gwen Stefani have a lot in common. What people want to see with nude celebrities is proof that these superstars are not gods. Web surfers are robbing celebrities of their privacy and—in effect—stealing back power.

Psychologically, the Internet is very Marxist: Everyone with a modem has access to the same information, so we all get jammed into a technological middle class. You don't need to be Lenny Kravitz to know what Lisa Bonet looks like when she steps out of the shower. You don't even need to wear hemp pants. All you need is a modem and a phone jack.

Now, is aspiring to be as sexually informed as Lenny Kravitz a sad commentary on modern ambition? Perhaps.⁵ But that's not the issue. The issue is that something that's probably bad (i.e., porn) is helping us achieve something that's probably good (i.e., delivering a technological notion to the common man).

Yet one question remains:

Why don't women need this?

If this theory is all true, why are 99 percent of porn sites directed toward heterosexual men? Wouldn't this imply that females can't fathom the difference between the real and the virtual, even though they all obviously do? Why can women comprehend the power of the Internet without masturbating to JPEG images of dehumanizing sex acts? And why would no intelligent woman ever feel the need to rationalize her own weakness by arguing that her perversion actually expands her mind?

I can only assume it has something to do with licking your own nipples.

- [1.](#) Except, of course, my mom.
- [2.](#) One Web designer actually told me that focusing a discussion around the topic of porn sites "insults" the Internet, prompting me to ask him if the Internet gets jealous when I use the microwave.
- [3.](#) Best known for her role as the teenage werewolf slayer.
- [4.](#) Are people (besides Al Gore) still using this term? Probably not.
- [5.](#) Well, actually, "yes."

The Lady or the Tiger

It's no secret that cold cereal was invented to help nineteenth-century Victorians stifle their rampant sexual desires. Any breakfast historian can tell you that. Sylvester Graham (1794–1851), a so-called “philosopher and nutrition crusader,” was the kind of forward-thinking wackmobile who saw an indisputable connection between a person's decadence and their eating habits; this was partially augmented by his perception that the medical profession was wicked. “Disease is never the legitimate result of the normal operations of any of our organs,” he wrote, a sentiment that would eventually spawn the creation of Quisp.

Mr. Graham suspected that bad food and inappropriate sexual desires—particularly masturbation—were the true cause of every major illness. This made the cure for all sickness relatively simple: sexual moderation (i.e., less than thirteen orgasms a year for married couples, which actually seems reasonable), daily exercise, and a proper diet.

By 1840, Graham's career was in shambles; this does not seem altogether surprising, considering he was insane. However, his well-argued insanity influenced a New Yorker named James Caleb Jackson, and Jackson embraced Graham's philosophy on his way toward creating a bad-tasting wafer out of graham flour and water. He called his food “Granula” (a precursor to Granola). Jackson was force-feeding his wretched Granula in his Dansville, New York, sanitarium when it was discovered by Ellen Harmon White, a Seventh-Day Adventist. She adopted the idea and started her own sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1866. In need of a staff doctor, White hired a scrappy young physician named John Harvey Kellogg. John hired his brother, William, as clerk of the institute.

John Kellogg was also a disciple of the Graham philosophy and agreed that a flavorless, grain-based food was precisely what America needed. By 1902, he had conjured a way to produce flake cereal—the ideal medium for a crunchy, soulless pabulum. He tried to make wheat flakes, but the technology for such an innovation did not yet exist. Corn flakes, however, worked swimmingly.

Initially developed for scientific purposes, corn flakes struck the brothers Kellogg as a savvy business opportunity. This crispy treat seemed perfect for a society assumedly filled with oversexed, disease-ridden lunatics. And while selling cereal made money, it also raised ethical dilemmas: The angelic White was devastated that the Kelloggs were making money from a food designed to improve human purity. Meanwhile, John Kellogg was upset that his brother added sugar to the flake recipe to improve sales, a supplement he believed would liberate the public libido and turn every corn flake aficionado into a raging sexaholic. The Kellogg brothers eventually sued one another. After winning the lawsuit, William Kellogg took control of the enterprise; his puritan brother remained a stockholder.

Years later, a trio of Rastafarian elves would promote puffed rice.

Today, few members of the scientific community see a close connection between cold cereal and sex, although advertisers still did in the 1950s. Early Corn Flakes commercials showed Superman eating cereal with Jimmy Olsen, but never with Lois Lane; this was to keep viewers from inferring that Superman and Lois Lane had spent the night together (evidently, the notion of Superman and Jimmy Olsen having a homosexual relationship was not a concern). However, sex is not the central theme to modern cereal advertising. In fact, selling cereal is not the central theme to cereal advertising. Saturday morning commercials for all the best cereals are teaching kids how to figure out what's cool. They're the first step in the indoctrination of future hipsters: Cereal commercials teach us that anything desirable is supposed to be exclusionary.

An inordinate number of cereal commercials are based on the premise that a given cereal is so delicious that a fictional creature would want to steal it. We are presented with this scenario time and time again. The most obvious is the Trix Rabbit, a tragic figure whose doomed existence is not unlike that of Sisyphus. Since the cereal's inception, the rabbit—often marginalized as “silly”—has never been allowed to enjoy even one bowl of his favorite foodstuff, and the explanation for this embargo smacks of both age discrimination and racism (we are to accept that Trix is reserved exclusively “for kids”).¹

An even sadder illustration of cereal segregation is Sonny the Cuckoo Bird, arguably the most tortured member of the advertising community. Sonny is plagued with self-loathing; though outspokenly *otaku* for Cocoa Puffs, he doesn't feel he deserves to consume them. Sonny will do anything

to escape from his jones, including (but not limited to) locking himself into a primitive skycycle and shooting himself into outer space. To make matters worse, he is bombarded by temptation: Random children endlessly taunt him with heaping bowls of C-Puffs, almost like street junkies waving heroin needles in the face of William S. Burroughs. The kids have cereal, and Sonny does not. Translation: The kids are cool, and Sonny's an extremist and a failure. And as long as they possess what he does not, Sonny shall remain a second-class phoenix, doomed by his own maniacal ambition for breakfast.

Commercials for Lucky Charms star a leprechaun who replaced the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow with a bowl of marshmallow-laden cereal, a narrative device that slightly overstated the value of the actual product. The Cookie Crisp² mascot was a masked rascal named "Crook," whose whole selfidentity was built on stealing cereal. In ads for both Cocoa and Fruity Pebbles, Barney Rubble went to ridiculous lengths in the hope of shoplifting Fred Flintstone's breakfast, occasionally dressing like a woman and/or rapping like Ghostface Killah. Time and time again, commercials for cereal assault children with the same theme: A product's exclusivity is directly proportional to its social cachet, which is the definition of calculated adult coolness.

When I say *calculated adult coolness*, I'm referring to the kind of coolness that generally applies to people between the ages of nineteen and thirty-six. This is different than *mainstream teen coolness* and *aging hipster default coolness*, both of which reflect an opposing (and sort of pathetic) consumer aesthetic. Cereal ads are directed at kids, but they barely work on young people; the kind of advertising that works on a teenager are bandwagon spots for things like Trident and khaki Gap pants. Those ads imply that these are products everybody else already owns. Teenagers claim they want to be cool, but they mostly just want to avoid being uncool. It's the same for aging hipsters, an equally terrified class of Americans who slowly conclude that the key to staying relevant is by exhibiting default appreciation for the most obvious youth culture entities; this is why you often hear forty-seven-year-old men with ponytails saying things like, "Oh, I'm totally into the new stuff. That new Nickelback record is just terrific." Aging hipsters and corduroy-clad high school sophomores are both primarily concerned with dodging lameness. However, there is a stretch in everyone's early adulthood where they can choose (or choose against)

creating their own personalized version of nonpopulist cool, which may (or may not) succeed. This is accomplished by embracing semioriginal, semielitist cultural artifacts that remain just out of reach to those who desire them—the so-called “Cocoa Puffs of Power.”

We all relate to Sonny the Cuckoo Bird. We pursue that which retreats from us, and coolness is always a bear market. Coolness is always what others seem to have naturally—an unspecific, delicious, chocolately paradigm we must pilfer through subterfuge. It drives us, for lack of a better term, coo coo. And part of the reason we struggle is because there is no hard-and-fast clarity about what qualifies anything as *cool*. It needs to be original, but only semioriginal: It would be legitimately inventive (and kind of “out there”) to casually walk around with the petrified skull of a orangutan under your arm for no obvious reason, but this would only seem cool to a select class of performance artist. A better choice would be a T-shirt featuring the cast of *After M*A*S*H*. A cool image also needs to be semielitist, but it can’t be *wholly* elitist: What you display should be extremely hard to find, yet could have been *theoretically* found by absolutely *anyone* six months ago (had they possessed the foresight). This is why calculated adult coolness would reward the possession of, say, a can of Elf soda pop, yet frown upon the possession of, say, four ounces of weapons-grade uranium.³

The impact of this understanding comes later in life, usually at college, and usually around the point when being “weird” starts to be periodically interpreted by others as “charming” and/or “sexually intriguing.” As noted earlier, kids don’t really understand the nuance of cereal advertising until they reach their twenties; this is when characters like the Trix Rabbit evolve into understated Christ figures. And though the plot is not purposeful on the behalf of cereal makers, it’s also not accidental. Cereal mascots are generally associated with sugared cereals—while a box of Wheaties might feature anyone from Bruce Jenner to Michelle Kwan, Count Chocula sticks with its mischievous vampire. Super Golden Crisp sells itself with the portrait of a laid-back bear wearing a mock turtleneck; Grape Nuts sells itself with a photograph of Grape Nuts. And this is more proof of cereal’s overlooked relationship to American cool: Being cool is mostly ridiculous, and so is sugared cereal. That’s why we like it.

I eat sugared cereal almost exclusively. This is because I’m the opposite of a “no-nonsense” guy. I’m an “all-nonsense” guy. Every time I drive a

long distance, I'm hounded by the fear that I will get a flat tire and be unable to change it. When a button falls off one of my dress shirts, I immediately throw away the entire garment and buy a new one. I can't swim; to me, twelve feet of water is no different than twelve feet of hydrochloric acid (it will kill me just as dead). However, I *can* stay awake for seventy-two straight hours. I *can* immediately memorize phone numbers without writing them down. When flipping channels during commercial breaks in televised sporting events, I *can* innately sense the perfect moment to return to what I was watching originally. So the rub is that I have these semicritical flaws and I have these weirdly specific gifts, and it seems like most Americans are similarly polarized by what they can (and cannot) do. There are no-nonsense people, and there are nonsense people. And it's been my experience that nonsense people tend to consume Cocoa Krispies and Lucky Charms and Cap'n Crunch ("nonsense food," if you will). Consequently, we nonsense types spend hours and hours staring at cardboard creatures like the Trix Rabbit and absorbing his ethos, slowly ingesting the principles of exclusionary coolness while rapidly ingesting sugar-saturated spoonfuls of Vitamin B-12.

The desire to be cool is—ultimately—the desire to be rescued. It's the desire to be pulled from the unwashed masses of society. It's the desire to be advanced beyond the faceless humanoid robots who will die unheralded deaths and never truly matter, mostly because they all lived the same pedestrian life. Without the spoils of exclusionary coolness, we're just cogs in the struggle. We're like a little kid trying to kayak (or perhaps freestyle rock climb), and all the older kids keep mocking our efforts, openly implying that we cannot compete. But if we can just find that one cool thing that nobody else has—that gregarious, nine-foot animated jungle cat who can provide a glimmer of hope and a balanced breakfast—we can be better than ourselves. *We can be tigers.* 'Atta boy.

[1.](#) Proof that America is ultimately a sympathetic nation surfaced in 1976, when a consumer election sponsored by General Mills indicated that over 99 percent of Trix eaters felt the flamboyant six-foot rabbit deserved a bowl of Trix, which places his approval rating on par with Colin Powell in 1996.

2. This is not to be confused with the short-lived Oatmeal Cookie Crisp, a cereal fronted by the good-natured wizard “Cookie Jarvis.”

3. Although this would make you very cool in Syria.

This Is Zodiac Speaking

The killing machine wore a cowboy hat, and he was a real sweetheart.

Let me drag you back to the summer of 2001. I was in a karaoke bar in a Washington town called Lacey, a little place outside Olympia, which is a little place outside Seattle. That's when my friend Sarah appears to have danced with a serial killer. Sarah spent ten minutes twirling and whirling to Brooks & Dunn with an (allegedly) fucked-up weirdo who may have killed at least five women throughout the Pacific Northwest. I suppose this fella did seem a tad creepy (at least to me), but not in a "I'm gonna drag you home to rape you and kill you and defile your corpse" sort of way. That would be an exaggeration on the behalf of my memory. He just seemed like the kind of person who aspired to buy a used Trans Am and possibly wore Brut cologne.

The bar was a joint strangely called Mehfil, and—for some odd reason—it's attached to an Indian restaurant; you could kind of smell curry fused with warm Budweiser, assuming that's possible (perhaps it was just the scent of lumberjack sweat). The reason we were in Mehfil was because certain friends of mine think karaoke is "fabulously ironic," apparently because stupid, white-trash divorcées often sing Linda Ronstadt's "It's So Easy" in public. What honestly seemed more ironic was that the vast majority of people in this particular bar were semi-intellectual twenty-two-year-old hippies from the nearby fake college of Evergreen, all of whom were trying to feel superior by mocking the (maybe) eight or nine buck-toothed regulars who earnestly sing at Mehfil as an extension of their actual life. In places like Olympia, coolness and condescension are pretty much the same thing.

However, one of those sincere regulars at Mehfil was a man named Michael Braae, and he was getting the last laugh, mostly by (allegedly) killing local girls at random. But we didn't know that at the time, of course; we were just getting hammered on Maker's Mark and Pepsi when Braae sauntered up to my friend Sarah and politely asked her to dance.

Now, Sarah is not exactly Gisele; I can recall that there was at least one other woman at the bar that night who was more striking than she. But

Sarah is definitely attractive, and she's a good drinker, and she has luxurious red hair that smells like papayas. Moreover, Sarah just looks *nice*; she is the kind of person who makes you want to tell your secrets. Her eyes are guileless and enthusiastic at the same time. And part of me suspects that's why Michael Braae thought she'd be a perfect girl to dance with, and—at least in theory—shoot in the skull, which is what some investigators believe he did to a girl named Marchelle Morgan a month before he was arrested.

Fortunately, Sarah's brush with Braae did not end with any skull shooting. "Cowboy Mike" (that's what everyone called him at the bar) merely danced with her twice (and he was a pretty nifty dancer). We all watched them from across the room. When they finished, Sarah sheepishly ditched him and returned to our table of well-acquainted drunks; later that night, we teased her about having a new boyfriend while picking up some relatively terrible food at a Jack in the Box restaurant. And we never thought about Cowboy Mike again... until the Olympia cops apprehended him four weeks later. Sarah got to see his charming face on the front page of her newspaper. It seems he had jumped off a bridge into Evel Knievel's Snake River, fleeing from local authorities who didn't want him to kill any more of his guileless, enthusiastic, red-haired dance partners.

Somehow, I seem to have acquired three friends who have known serial killers. I find Sarah's encounter especially intriguing, mostly because I happened to witness it firsthand; by total coincidence, I was visiting the very night Braae tried to flirt with her. However, the reason I find that encounter so interesting is not because I sat five feet from an alleged monster, nor is it because I've casually looked into the eyes of evil, nor is it that I feel like I've vicariously brushed against some twisted version of celebrity. It's mostly because something now seems different about Sarah, even though she's exactly the same. There's a sexy residue to the whole Serial Killer Experience; somehow, it morphs the way I look at all the people who simply happened to collide with them (either by choice or by accident). There's something amazingly *modern* about meeting a man who kills innocent strangers arbitrarily. It has a way of making someone's personality abstractly sophisticated.

This is probably because serial killing is the most modern of high crimes, even though it's not new in any official sense (Jack the Ripper's 1888

London spree is the most obvious proof of this, but there are certainly others). The metaphoric newness of serial killing has nothing to do with chronology; it has to do with its meaning. At least culturally, there is something accelerated about the notion of killing strangers for no valid reason. It's one of those nightmare situations we collectively try to rationalize into nonexistence, almost as if it's entirely fictional. And most of the time, that rationalization makes sense: If a man is trying to kill you, his reasons—though flawed—are still *usually* within the scope of explanation; perhaps he wants to shoot you because you're sleeping with his wife (or perhaps he just thinks you are, which is just as bad). If someone is trying to break into your house after midnight, he probably has a clear motive; he probably needs money to buy crack or crystal meth or Wonder Bread. Most American crime is no random accident. I suppose nobody deserves to die, but it certainly seems like most people in America who get murdered have put themselves in a position where getting shot or stabbed is not an unthinkable consequence; their lifestyle dictates a certain degree of risk. However, that's not the case with serial killer victims. I realize serial killers tend to ice prostitutes more often than anyone else, but they're not killing them *because* they're prostitutes; it's not like serial killers are sexual moralists.¹ Hookers are simply easier to kill (no one notices when they disappear). If given the choice, the typical serial killer would just as soon shoot a dental assistant. In fact, he'd just as soon shoot someone like *you*, and maybe someday he will. This is why serial killing strikes me as such a modern act: It validates the seemingly irrational fear that someone you've never met before will just decide to capriciously end your life. It's not *figuratively* senseless (like a gangland killing, which is stupid but still explicable), it's *literally* senseless (inasmuch as there's no connection between the two involved parties and no benefit to the assailant, beyond giving him the opportunity to masturbate on—or into—a corpse).

My obsession with serial killers began when I was ten years old. My fourth-grade teacher told our class that we should never hitchhike, because the only people who picked up hitchhikers were perverted serial killers. This advice was complicated by what my fifth-grade teacher told us the following year; she said that we would all have driver's licenses in a few years, and the one rule we always needed to remember was never to pick up hitchhikers. This was because all hitchhikers were serial killers. According to what I learned in public school, every person on every freeway was

trolling for destruction. I used to imagine nomadic, sadistic drifters thumbing rides with bloodthirsty Volkswagen owners, both desperately waiting for the first opportunity to kill each other. Hitchhiking seemed like an ultraviolent race against time.

Keeping this threat in mind, I began casually studying serial killers in my spare time, mostly through TV documentaries on PBS and British books with comical names like *The Mammoth Book of Murder* and *The Mammoth Book of Killer Women*. Due to my age (and my interest in the band W.A.S.P.), I suspect part of me was intrigued by the necrophilia gruesomeness of the police reports. However, what I found more fascinating were the skewed details about the killers' lives, all of which seemed more original and more clichéd than anything I experienced through literature or film. It didn't "almost" seem funny; it seemed *completely* funny, pretty much all the time. I will never forget the 1985 arrest of Richard Ramirez, the infamous California "Night Stalker." At one point in his court hearing, Ramirez held up his hand with a pentagram scrawled on the palm and hissed the word "*Evil!*" My cousin Greg and I were twelve when this happened, and we saw this particular image on television while attending a weeklong Catholic retreat that was hosted by local nuns. For the whole week, we drew pentagrams on our paws with ballpoint pens and constantly said "*Evil!*" in the hope of amusing the girls at this event, most of whom loved Culture Club and wore Esprit T-shirts. This was the same week we learned how to be altar boys.

However, my interest in guys like Ramirez went a little further than Greg's, since he *only* saw all this as comical. At a very early age, an understanding of serial killers seemed important to me. The fact that Ramirez and I had the same favorite AC/DC song ("Night Prowler") didn't freak me out, but it certainly made me wonder if I was somehow predisposed to freakish impulses. My all-time favorite serial killer was the never-captured Zodiac, the San Francisco-based mastermind who bragged to newspapers about his murders through a byzantine code and may have actually killed people because of his interest in math.² Somehow, that sounded like something I would come up with. I didn't *relate* to these guys, per se, but I always wondered if I was a "serial person"—a Midwestern Zodiac who simply had no desire to kill.

This is why I can't resist badgering my acquaintances who have encountered genuine madmen; perhaps my obsession with serial killers has

less to do with what makes them different from everyone else and more to do with what makes them similar to those of us who don't feel compelled to kill hookers. As I said, I have three such chums: Beyond serving as a firsthand witness to Sarah's dance-a-thon with the second-rate death machine Cowboy Mike, I also know a guy who became friends with John Wayne Gacy (the much publicized "Clown Killer") and another who attended high school with Jeffrey Dahmer (the most stridently prototypical serial killer in pop history). Much to their unilateral annoyance, I continually find myself compelled to ask them different versions of the same question: *What does it mean to know a serial killer?* And it seems like the answer is the same every single time.

It was on the last day of 2001 that I discovered I knew a man who knew John Wayne Gacy (or maybe it was on the first day of 2002, depending on how you quantify time). Near the conclusion of a rather dull New Year's Eve party, I found myself chatting with a dude named Eric Nuzum, who works as the programming director for the National Public Radio station in Kent, Ohio. I was mostly arguing with his clever Asian girlfriend about the value of Bjork (she seemed to think Bjork was the cat's pajamas), but the conversation somehow touched tangentially on the fact that Nuzum has one of John Wayne Gacy's paintings hanging in his living room. I was immediately curious about this, but I found that Nuzum was reticent to talk about the subject (beyond casually admitting that he did, in fact, have one of Gacy's paintings and that he did, in fact, carry on a friendship with the sociopath for roughly three years while the ex-clown sat on death row). I managed to pry a few more details about this relationship from him at the party, but I could tell he wasn't exactly stoked about being hammered with questions about Gacy in the context of a New Year's Eve fiesta. However, I asked him if I could interview him at length about Gacy at a later date, and he said, "Oh, probably." When I e-mailed him about that possibility a month later, he was clearly more enthusiastic about having such a conversation. And by the time I finally showed up at his house, he seemed downright *excited* to be talking about John Wayne Gacy, at times behaving like I was a psychiatrist and he was a patient reminiscing about formative experiences from his childhood. It almost felt like the old *Bob Newhart Show*.

What happened, I think, was that my journalistic interest in Nuzum's relationship with Gacy—as opposed to my prurient interest in Gacy himself

—sort of jarred Eric into realizing that there was something noteworthy about having made small talk with someone who was about as nocuous as any twentieth-century American. This is especially true when one considers that Nuzum was not some kind of obsessive death groupie; his involvement with Gacy stemmed from involvement with an anticensorship group called Refuse and Resist (Nuzum is something of a First Amendment fanatic, having written a book titled *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*). It seems Nuzum had discovered that Gacy was the only inmate in the entire Illinois penal system who wasn't allowed to sell his paintings commercially, and—being the spunky twenty-four-year-old idealist that he was—Nuzum decided to remedy this injustice. His first step was contacting Gacy by mail (he had to make sure Gacy *wanted* to be liberated), and things just kind of took off from there.

Like most incarcerated humans, Gacy loved mail; unlike most incarcerated humans, Gacy was picky about his friends. When anyone wrote to him, he returned a typed, two-page survey that asked fifty-two questions about artistic affinities, political ideologies, and personal values. Nuzum still has that form. The most ironic section of the questionnaire asks the applicant to describe what kind of advice he or she would offer to children; one assumes Gacy's honest advisement would have been, "Don't struggle while I sodomize you." But the bottom line is that Nuzum responded to the fifty-two questions and slowly found himself a new pen pal. After a year of writing, Gacy began calling him on the telephone (collect, of course).

"He had HBO in his cell, so we talked about what was on HBO a lot," Nuzum recalls. "He liked classic movies, but he really seemed more interested in mainstream crap like *Footloose*. His tastes weren't very sophisticated. But sometimes I suspect that he liked big, bang-up Hollywood movies like *Patriot Games* because he knew they were culturally popular with people on the outside, and that made him feel more normal."

While Nuzum was telling me about Gacy's appreciation for the early work of Kevin Bacon, I found my eyes drifting over to the rudimentary portrait of Elvis Presley on his wall. This was the painting he had mentioned at the party. The image was of a relatively young Elvis, sadly staring at the ground against a sky-blue background. In the lower right corner, I could see the signature of "J.W. Gacy." It's not a stellar painting; I

doubt Nuzum would hang it in his living room if it didn't come from someone who snuffed the life out of thirty-three Chicagoans and stuffed them into the crawl space beneath his home.

Now, I realize there are people who would find Nuzum's decorating decision pretty fucked-up. They wouldn't hang one of Gacy's paintings in their house if he had twice the talent of Picasso, and some might even suggest that Nuzum inadvertently perpetuates the gothic glamour of mass murder; by hanging a mediocre painting in this living room, it proves that (a) Gacy is a celebrity, and (b) killing people warrants celebrity stature. I don't think it's a coincidence that America is the most celebrity-driven culture on earth *and* the homeland for more serial killers than virtually every other country combined. Serial killing is glam killing (or at least it seems that way after a culprit gets caught).

But here's where things get complex: Nuzum is barely interested in Gacy's murders. It's really the one aspect of history's most sinister clown³ he doesn't enjoy discussing. However, I don't think it's because he's in any sort of denial; Nuzum is certain that Gacy did terrible, terrible things. It's just that Eric happens to be one of those hyperkinetic NPR liberals who spends his free time rescuing kittens from the pound. The deeper reality, I suspect, is that he feels *sorry* for John Wayne Gacy, and that—somehow—he was part of a society that makes people like Gacy exist.

"I guess I always had this image of a brilliant, maniacal genius who constructed these complicated plans to satisfy his sexual urges and kill, kill, kill," Nuzum tells with his fingers interlocked behind his head and his pupils fixed on the ceiling. "But the fact of the matter is that he really wasn't that smart. There's such a vast difference between trying to understand this kind of crime and trying to understand anything else. With someone like O. J. Simpson, you could argue that he killed two people and he knew exactly what he was doing. With someone like Timothy McVeigh, one assumes he was able to rationalize the 168 people he killed as casualties of war. But this is different. You know, Gacy always insisted to me that he never killed animals when he was younger, which is usually common with serial killers. For him, it was all sexually based. That was his motivation for everything. But what does that mean? I still don't understand it."

It sort of dawned on me that—the more I talked to Nuzum about this—the further our conversation devolved from the original "*What does it mean*

to know a serial killer” question, which indicated to me that I probably wasn’t going to find the answer from him. All I really learned was that I am less compassionate than just about everyone I know. If I had known John Wayne Gacy, I suspect I would have been fascinated by his impending execution; I would have constantly asked him about his thoughts on death and his expectations for the afterlife, and how the experience of living changes once your life suddenly has an exact expiration date. To me, his lethal injection would have been the summit of our rapport. But Nuzum didn’t see it like that at all.

“I was very upset when he was put to death,” Eric told me. “In fact, when it became obvious that it was just a matter of time, that’s when our relationship ended. I stopped accepting his collect calls. I would like to say that I cut things off because his phone calls got weird—and they certainly did near the end, because he’d ramble for twenty minutes and I wouldn’t even say a sentence—but the truth is that it just got hard to think about what it was going to be like when he was dead.

“If I learned anything from the time I knew him, though, it’s that I think I now have a wider view of heinous crimes than most people. Once you get to know a murderer as a person, you actually start to rationalize things less, and you start to see things more clearly. For example, one time we were talking on the phone very casually about television, and one of the guards happened to walk by Gacy while we were talking. Gacy immediately freaked out and started raving about how this person had woken him up the night before by shining a flashlight on him. Judging from Gacy’s reaction, you would have sworn this guard raped his mother. He lost control and just went ballistic. But thirty seconds later, he was completely fine. And I remember thinking, ‘I can totally see how this person could kill children.’ He was just a guy with a huge problem.”

Jeffrey Dahmer had a problem, too. In fact, he had a bunch of them, and they kept getting worse. He was an alcoholic (not good). He was a self-loathing homosexual (even worse). He was a murderer (which downplays the sexual struggle), he was a cannibal (maybe the only habit that makes murdering people seem borderline normal), and he longed to surround himself with corpses in the hope that they would become surrogates for the human relationships he could not sustain in day-to-day life (’nuff said). There isn’t a dimension of serial killer lore that Dahmer didn’t embody, including the obligatory tortured adolescence. When he was a high school

student in Ohio, Dahmer's life was profoundly sad and predictably disturbing. I know this because that's when Derf used to hang out with him.

"Derf" is John Backderf, a comic book artist I worked with at a newspaper in Akron, Ohio. Dahmer is a huge deal in Akron, because that's his hometown. Technically, he graduated from a joint educational facility called Revere High School, which was comprised of kids from two small towns: Bath (a relatively affluent suburb) and Richfield (a town best known for hosting the now-destroyed Richfield Coliseum, the former home for countless hair metal concerts and the Cleveland Cavaliers). But for all practical purposes, those communities are just extensions of suburban Akron. And what's interesting about Akron is that—due to a variety of socioeconomic reasons—the community tends to spawn things that could not have come from anywhere else in America. The band Devo is one example. Jeffrey Dahmer is another.

I had been working at the *Akron Beacon Journal* for less than a month when someone told me that Derf grew up with Dahmer, which was weird for two reasons. The first is obvious—it's always surprising to meet someone who used to have gym class with a cannibal. However, what was even stranger is that I had never even met this Derf character; some coworker just felt compelled to tell me there was a person on staff who went to high school with J. Dahmer. This same person also told me that the legal name of Derf's little son Max was supposedly "Maximum Volume Backderf," which seemed only slightly less unreasonable than eating from the corpse of a Milwaukee homosexual.

When I eventually met Derf that summer, he turned out to be very cool; he was sort of this *über*-sarcastic, unrepentant, aging punk rocker who always wore a Greek fishing hat and would stroll by my desk twice a week to tell me that every band I liked was terrible. And when I finally asked him if he really knew Dahmer, his reaction was to say, "Well, of course I did," as if I had just asked him if he hated Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. He proceeded to give me a comic he published titled *My Friend Dahmer*, an illustrated twenty-six-page narrative of his youthful memories of a demented scamp known simply as "Jeff."

Without being the least bit exploitive, *My Friend Dahmer* paints an eerily vivid portrait of the young Akronian weirdo and suggests that all the signs of his future monstrosities would have been clearly visible to anyone who had cared enough to pay attention. The title is technically misleading, as

Dahmer appears to have had no real friends whatsoever in high school—but Derf and his geeky cronies were probably the closest approximation. They would pay him \$35 to go to the local mall and perform his “Dahmer shtick,” which amounted to him pretending to have cerebral palsy (it seems his mother’s interior decorator suffered from the condition, prompting Dahmer to mimic the spastic, seizurelike movements). Dahmer’s preperformance ritual was to shotgun six beers in the backseat of a car, which was the same thing he did every single day before school. Beyond the summer after tenth grade, Derf can’t recall ever seeing Dahmer when he wasn’t either “in character” or completely and utterly intoxicated.

People picked on Dahmer, but he didn’t respond; he mostly existed as a zombie who occasionally blurted out the indecipherable phrase “Baaaa!” at inappropriate times. He was a victim waiting to become a victimizer. And he finally made that transition one month after he, Derf, and two hundred other kids graduated from Revere. It was the summer of 1978, and Jeffrey destroyed his first human.

“Believe it or not, I consider Dahmer something of a tragic figure,” Derf once told me while munching on a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios. “My relationship with him ended just before he killed that first guy, but I honestly believe he could have been stopped. Some adult could have stepped in when he was younger, I think, and changed the path he was on. But the moment he actually killed someone, any sympathy I might have had for him disappeared. When he crossed over to the other side, he became a monster to me, and he deserved a bullet in the back of the head.”

Certainly, there is something paradoxical about Derf’s assessment of Dahmer. His portrait of J.D. in *My Friend Dahmer* aggressively humanizes the killer, often to the point where he becomes almost likable. However, the moment Dahmer took someone’s life, Derf says his perception suddenly mirrored that of the rest of America. And as our conversation continued, I started to suspect Derf’s relationship with this guy was a little more complicated than even Derf was aware of. This was particularly clear when I asked him if he was *glad* that Dahmer went to Revere High. My specific question was this: If we concede that Dahmer was destined to commit these crimes regardless of where he grew up, would Derf have preferred that Jeffrey been raised in someplace like Cincinnati or Dayton, thereby making him someone he never knew? Or is he happy that—if *someone* had to go to the mall with the young Dahmer—it was him?

“Well, since I’ve led an exceedingly dull life in all other regards, having known Dahmer has certainly been periodically interesting and sporadically surreal,” he answered. “For example, last night I was watching one of those *Saturday Night Live* reruns on Comedy Central. It was an episode from one of the really bad years. But there was this skit where a guy is singing some stupid song, and he mentions Jeffrey Dahmer. And it suddenly hits me that he’s talking about a guy I used to pass in the halls every day. That never stops being strange, I guess. But is it really *interesting*? I don’t know. I mean, how interesting would it have been to have known Michael J. Fox in high school? It’s kind of the same thing.”

It’s noteworthy that Derf mentions Michael J. Fox as a metaphor for knowing Dahmer; Nuzum made a similar comparison when discussing John Wayne Gacy, but his metaphor was Cameron Diaz. I suspect this kind of celebrity analogy is common. However, part of me deeply disagrees with the accuracy of those comparisons, and here’s why: The fame a serial killer achieves is a sicker—but more authentic—brand of fame. There are thousands of thin young women in Hollywood who wanted to be Cameron Diaz, and hundreds of them could have done exactly that. There are five hundred girls who could have had her career. There is nothing inherently special about Cameron Diaz; until she made a movie, she was just an attractive person. At some point, she *became* Cameron Diaz. But Jeffrey Dahmer didn’t *become* Jeffrey Dahmer the first time he killed somebody. That’s always who he was. Derf claims he “turned into a monster” the day he killed his first victim, but I think that’s mostly just what he’d like to believe; more than almost anyone, Derf knows that Dahmer was always just a guy who couldn’t (or at least *didn’t*) relate to the normal boundaries of right and wrong. To know that kind of person is to know the darkest kind of power. To me, that has to mean something. But Derf will always disagree with me.

“What kind of meaning would you expect this to have? The guy was a parasite,” Derf tells me, his mouth still half-filled with Cheerios. “He gave nothing to society, and his effect on me is pretty negligible. What is there to learn? These questions seem like bullshit to me.”

Which brings us back to little red-haired Sarah ...

“I really must say that I feel sort of ambivalent about the whole Cowboy Mike situation,” Sarah tells me over the phone. She has just finished her

second beer of the night, but she does not seem drunk; her boyfriend is trying to fall asleep in the other room. “In a way, I think you care about this more than I do. Because honestly, I would say my knowledge of serial killers is slightly below average.”

This is funny for two reasons. It’s mainly funny because Sarah has inexplicably concluded that there is (a) a universally accepted level for serial murder knowledge, and that (b) she somehow falls just below the national median. But it’s also funny because it’s true; if I didn’t keep bringing it up, I sometimes think Sarah would completely forget she danced with a man who might have killed her if given the opportunity.

“That night was actually something I tried not to think about for several months, and I guess I succeeded,” she said. “It initially seemed strange in the sense that I suppose I could have ended up like one of those women on those Lifetime movies who are always getting beaten. Had I been single, something terrible could have happened that night. I certainly can’t imagine that I would ever have gone home with that person, but I can imagine maybe having a cigarette with the guy. He was really a gentleman. And he didn’t so much seem *creepy* as much as he just seemed unusually skinny.”

Well, great. Serial killers aren’t necessarily spooky; they simply have high metabolisms. And they like to watch *Footloose*. And to know them means nothing, even if it does. Apparently, there is no one on earth who needs to meet a serial killer more than me; only then will I realize these people are meaningless. Get ready, all ye lonely hitchhikers. My car awaits your empty eyes, your random perversity, and your hand of perpetual doom. One way or the other, I need the truth. The next dance is mine, Cowboy.

1. It should be noted that certain experts disagree with me on this point; some are prone to classify one genre of serial killers as “mission-oriented,” which means they aspire to kill specific people (such as hookers) in order to improve society. Other classifications include “visionary motive” types (who imagine voices inside their head), “thrill-oriented” killers (who find the process of murder exciting), and “lust killers” (who actively get a sexual thrill from torture and execution).

2. One of the Zodiac's many coded missives included a reference to the semiesoteric mathematical concept of "radians," which are 57.3-degree arcs used to calculate circles ($2 \times \pi$ radians = 360 degrees). Amazingly, it turns out Zodiac's victims were always found at perfect radian intervals in relation to the summit of nearby Mount Diablo. It does not appear that this could be a coincidence, especially since one of Zodiac's victims was a cabdriver who was instructed to drive to a specific location before being shot. This kind of "evil mathematical genius" behavior is part of the reason some people erroneously suspected that Unabomber Ted Kaczynski had been the Zodiac Killer as a younger man.

3. In fact, Eric gets kind of annoyed when people dwell on the fact that Gacy sometimes dressed as “Pogo the Clown” and performed at children’s birthday parties. “I think the clown stuff is really overdone,” he says. “He was just doing that as part of a civic group—it was really just an outreach of his political involvement.” Weirdly, this is true: Gacy was a political junkie who was once photographed with then–First Lady Rosalynn Carter. You’d think the GOP could do something with this.

All I Know Is What I Read in the Papers

As of the writing of this particular book, I have 43 “close friends,”¹ 196 “good friends,”² and 2,200 “affable acquaintances.”³ Due to the circumstances of my chosen existence, almost half of these people—somewhere in the neighborhood of 40 percent—currently work (or once worked) in some sort of media capacity. This means that the other 60 percent do not (or have not). This being the mathematical case, I feel as though I have a pretty solid grasp on the communication industry, as I have ties to both (a) the people presenting the news and (b) the people consuming it. And it has been my experience that they all pretty much hate it.

I would never try to convince someone not to hate the media. As far as I can tell, it’s a completely reasonable thing to hate. Whenever I meet someone who feels a sense of hatred for a large, amorphous body—the media, the government, Ticketmaster, the Illuminati, Anna Nicole Smith, whatever—I fully support their distaste. It’s always better to be mad at something vast and unspecific and theoretical, as these entities cannot sue you for defamation. But here’s my one problem with media bashers, both inside and outside the journalistic profession: They inevitably hate the wrong things. Just about everyone I know who has problems with newspapers (or magazines, or CNN, or Ted Koppel, et al.) is completely misdirecting their anger.

You say you want to hate the media? Fine. I happen to love the media, and I think it’s just about the only organism in America that works more often than it doesn’t. But if you’re truly serious about finding things to hate about your local newspaper, and you want to write letters to the editor that will actually make valid criticisms, I will help you.

DON’T WORRY ABOUT AGENDAS. WORRY ABOUT RANDOM CIRCUMSTANCE.

This is—indisputably and inarguably—the biggest misconception people make about the media. Everybody seems to be concerned that journalists

are constantly trying to slip their own political and philosophical beliefs into what they cover. This virtually never happens. And I am not being naive when I say this; it really doesn't happen.⁴ There are thousands of things that affect the accuracy of news stories, but the feelings of the actual reporter is almost never one of them. The single most important impact of any story is far less sinister: Mostly, it all comes down to (a) who the journalist has called, and (b) which of those people happens to call back first.

Are media outlets controlled by massive, conservative corporations? Well, of course they are. Massive conservative corporations own everything. Are most individual members of the media politically liberal? Absolutely. If talented writers honestly thought the world didn't need to be changed, they'd take jobs in advertising that are half as difficult and three times as lucrative. So—in theory—all the long-standing conspiracies about media motives are true. But—in practice—they're basically irrelevant, at least in the newspaper industry. There is no way the espoused Aryan masterminds who run the world can affect the content of any daily story; they usually have no idea what the hell is going on with anything in the world, and certainly not with what anyone's writing about. I worked in the Knight Ridder chain for four years, and I never got the impression that the CEO read anything, except maybe *Golf Digest*.

The media machine is too bloated to “manufacture consent.” What filters down from the queen bee is nominal; there is no successful macro agenda. Meanwhile, individual reporters—the drones who do all the heavy lifting—tend to be insane. Being a news reporter forces you to adopt a peculiar personality: You spend every moment of your life trying to eradicate emotion. Reporters overcompensate for every nonobjective feeling they've ever experienced; I once got into a serious discussion over whether or not the theft of a live fetus from the womb of a kidnapped pregnant woman could be publicly classified as a “tragedy.” What civilians in the conventional world need to realize is that *journalists are not like you*. They have higher ethics and less common sense. For example: Let's say somebody was trying to pass a resolution that created stricter pedophilia laws. Most normal people would think to themselves, “Well, I'm against kids being molested and so is everybody I've ever met, so—obviously—if I was asked to write a story about this resolution, I'd make sure people understood it was a positive thing.” Reporters never think like this. A

reporter would spend the next three hours trying to find an activist who'd give them a quote implying it was unconstitutional to stop people from performing oral sex on five-year-old boys. Journalists aren't trying to tell you their version of what's right and what's wrong, because anyone who's been a reporter for five years forgets how to tell the difference.

That's why the biggest influence on the content of most news stories is simply who calls back *first*. Most of the time, that's the catalyst for everything else that evolves into a news story. Since breaking the news is a competition-based industry, almost everything is done on deadline—and since journalism is founded on the premise that reality can only be shown through other people's statements, reporters are constantly placing phone calls to multiple sources with the hope that all of them (or at least *one* of them) will give the obligatory quotes the writer can turn into a narrative. That's why the first person who happens to return a reporter's phone message dictates whatever becomes the "final truth" of any story. Very often, the twenty-four-second-shot clock simply runs out before anyone else can be reached; consequently, that one returned phone call is all the information the journalist can use. And even when everyone else *does* calls back before deadline, the template has already been set by whoever got there first; from now on, every question the reporter asks will be colored by whatever was learned from the initial source. Is this bad? Yes. Does it sometimes lead to a twisted version of what really happened? Yes. But it's not an agenda. It's timing.

Don't obsess over the notion of insidious politics creeping into your newspaper. Leftist crackpots and faceless corporate hacks rarely affect the news. High school volleyball games affect the news—or at least they do if a reporter's kid happens to be one of the players. You see, high school volleyball games often start at 6:30 P.M., so that reporter is not going to wait at his desk past six o'clock to see if his phone rings. His wife will kill him if he does. Or maybe he *does* wait for that call; maybe he skips his daughter's game because he really needs the mayor to return his phone call in order to technically say "no comment" about an issue that the reporter already *knows* the mayor won't comment upon. Maybe our steadfast reporter waits and waits and waits, and at 7:20 he decides to get a Dr Pepper. This requires him to walk across the newsroom to wherever they keep the vending machines, and—while he pops his quarters into the pop machine—his phone rings. It's the mayor. But maybe the mayor hates using

voice mail, and maybe the mayor inexplicably assumes this reporter is actually a bleeding-heart socialist, so he hangs up without leaving a message. Two hours later, our metro reporter still doesn't have his obligatory "no comment," so the newspaper's metro editor tells him that the story needs to be held for at least one day so that they can get a response from the mayor. But twenty-four hours later, a hospital catches on fire, and that fire becomes the day's major news event. Meanwhile, the story about the mayor is suddenly old news, and—because of the fire—it's no longer on the front page; now it's buried on page B3. Most readers won't even notice it. But a handful of people who hate the mayor *will* notice it, and they'll assume the newspaper buried this story on purpose, either because (a) the reader is liberal, so he or she thinks the paper's aging Caucasian owner is in cahoots with the mayor, or because (b) the reader is conservative, so he or she thinks the liberal media is trying to raise taxes and mandate abortions and keep the tax-happy, baby-killing mayor in power. And all of this has nothing to do with politics, and it has nothing to do with agendas. It has to do with some guy wanting Dr Pepper. And shit like this happens *all the time*.

DISTRUST THE PROPER PEOPLE.

Über-idiotic people tend to think of the entire newspaper as one organism; they think that stories, columns, editorials, and advertisements are all exactly the same. Mildly intelligent people understand that there's a difference between what's on the front page and what's on the OpEd page. However, only a select few are aware that most of what's in a newspaper is either fact-plus-fiction or truth-minus-fact, which evens out to be just about the same thing.

Here's what I mean: People get nervous when they read stories in newspapers, because they always think they're being lied to or manipulated (this goes back to the aforementioned "agenda" presumption). They always think they're not getting the whole story. Actually, they're getting more than the whole story; they're getting the whole story, plus a bunch of stuff that has nothing to do with anything.

Remember our thirsty reporter who was waiting for the mayor to call him back? Well, let's say he finally leaves the office and swings by Stop-N-Go (maybe he wants another Dr Pepper). While walking toward the counter

with his beverage in hand, a crazed loner walks into the store and shoots the convenience store employee in the face, killing him instantly. The reporter watches this shooting happen. The crazed loner then begins screaming like a maniac, and two cops rush in and apprehend him. Now, remember—the reporter sees all of this firsthand. And as a consequence, he calls up his editor on a cell phone and volunteers to write a story about the event. And he probably writes something like this...

RANDOM CITY, USA—The owner of a local Stop-N-Go was killed tonight in a brutal act of seemingly random violence. The alleged perpetrator was immediately taken into custody but firmly denies his involvement in the crime. “I never shot nobody,” said the alleged gunman, who is also wanted for murder in seventeen other states.

Actually, I’m sort of exaggerating: I’m sure a copy editor would undoubtedly feel obligated to remove the word *brutal*. But by and large, this would be seen as a reasonable accounting of the events. This is why all reporters eventually go insane: Even if you see a guy shoot someone—in fact, even if a guy shoots *you* in the face, and you watch the bullet come out of the chamber of the .38 he’s holding—the event needs to be described as an “alleged” crime, and that alleged criminal needs to allege that he had no part in anything that allegedly happened.

Now, I realize this is essential to journalism, and I certainly don’t disagree with the principle behind that journalistic tradition. But these “essential” rules do create one rather embarrassing contradiction: Most serious news stories are peppered with information that is laughably false, and reporters are always fully aware of how false that information is. Newspapers are constantly quoting people who are openly lying, and almost every sound bite you hear in the broadcast media is partially false. And there’s nothing anyone can do about it. It’s not that the truth is being ignored; it’s just that the truth is inevitably combined with a bunch of crap that’s supposed to make news stories unbiased and credible, but really just makes them longer and less clear. The motivation for doing this is to foster objectivity, but it actually does the complete opposite. It makes finding an objective reality impossible, because you’re always getting facts *plus* requisite grains of “equalizing” fiction.

In his book *Explaining Hitler*, author Ron Rosenbaum applauds a group he calls the “First Explainers,” a collection of 1920s journalists who worked at publications like the *Munich Post* and risked their lives in order to illustrate the impending danger of the coming führer. He paints these guys as heroes. However, I’m not sure if modern reporters would even be allowed to perform that kind of watchdog function if a new Hitler-esque character emerged in the twenty-first century; he would probably just be referred to as a “charismatic, neoconservative upstart.”

As a result of this ham-fisted faux objectivity, skeptical news consumers often find themselves suspecting that a deeper truth can be found on the newspaper opinion pages, or through talk radio, or via egocentric iconoclasts like Bill O’Reilly or Michael Moore. The assumption is that—since these pundits openly admit their biases—you can trust their insights more. They display less guile, and you know where they’re coming from. But this is not true. You may find these people interesting and you may find them entertaining, but they offer nothing for anyone who doesn’t already agree with their espoused stance. George Will and Maureen Dowd are both more effective writers than I could ever hope to become, but all their political insights are unabashed propaganda, even when they happen to be right: They sometimes tell the truth, but they’re always subtracting facts. That’s what they get paid to do. They are paid to manipulate and simplify issues that are too complex for casual observers to understand independently. What makes them good columnists is their ability to present a version of the truth that somehow seems self-evident; they are urbane cult leaders. I will never understand people who complain that the media can’t be trusted, yet still inexplicably think they can learn something of value from Molly Ivins or Cal Thomas. Most of the time, political columnists and political commentators are trying to persuade you not to think critically about anything.

SPORTS REPORTERS HATE SPORTS.

Nobody realizes how much the people who write about sports despise the subject they write about. There is nothing they hate more. I know that seems paradoxical, and most of them would never admit it in public. But give them four drinks in a deserted tavern, and you will hear the truth: The people paid to inform you about the world of professional, collegiate, and

high school athletics would love to see all sports—except for maybe the NCAA basketball tournament—eradicated from the planet.

What's depressing is that this was not always the case for these people. Back when today's sportswriters were still enthusiastic young fellows playing outside at recess, they loved sports. It was the only thing they loved, usually. They were the kind of kids who would watch a baseball game on TV and keep the official book, and they worshiped Brent Musburger and they memorized statistics from the *World Almanac* and they cried when Dwight Clark caught a pass in the back of the end zone to beat the Dallas Cowboys in 1981. Very often, the only important connection they had with their fathers was watching *Monday Night Football*. All their adolescence, these guys dreamed of a life where they could think about sports for a living. So they all went to college and got journalism degrees, and they all got jobs as sportswriters. And five years later, they all find themselves watching games from the press box and secretly wishing they were holding sniper's rifles.

If you want to become jaded and bitter in the shortest period possible, become a sportswriter. You will spend your Friday nights trying to talk to high school kids who have nothing to say, and you will have to ask them questions until they give you a quote that proves it. You will spend your Saturday afternoons talking to college players who will earnestly discuss the importance of academics and school spirit two hours before they rape the first girl unluckiest enough to chug a GHB kamikaze. And if you become *really* good at your job, you will eventually get to live in hotels for weeks at a time, alongside millionaire pro athletes who—if not for their ability to perform one socially irrelevant act—would quite possibly kill you and steal your car. And you will still remember statistics from the *World Almanac*, but now those memories will make you mad.

However, athletes aren't the worst part about being a sportswriter; after a few months, the players merely become literary devices. The worst part about being a sportswriter is that no one will ever have a normal conversation with you for the rest of your life. Everyone you meet will either (a) want to talk about sports, or (b) assume *you* want to talk about sports. Strangers will feel qualified to walk up to you in a café and complain about Rasheed Wallace; upon your introduction, your girlfriend's father will immediately ask you oddly specific questions about the New

York Rangers. You may have insightful thoughts on the Middle East, but no one will care; they will be interested in your thoughts on middle relieving.

Over time, you will see your life disappear into sweat and contract negotiations and descriptions of the wishbone offense. And you will hate it. And normal sports fans deserve to know this. They deserve to know that the people telling them about the Utah Jazz enjoy pro basketball about as much as Catholic priests enjoy watching *The Thorn Birds*. I honestly feel the best sports journalism of the last ten years has been Jim Rome's work on his radio program *The Jungle*, since Rome seems to be the only man who aggressively accepts one very important truth: The single-best part about loving sports is *hating* sports.

CELEBRITY JOURNALISM IS A NEW KIND OF MEANINGLESSNESS.

During the summer of 2001, you may recall a temporary hubbub about Tom Junod, a writer for *Esquire* magazine who did a profile on Michael Stipe of R.E.M. The controversy was that Junod admitted to fabricating much of the story, particularly details that made Stipe appear as an iconoclastic weirdo who stuck pennies on his eyes and consumed packets of sugar for no apparent reason.

My initial reaction to Junod's piece was that it was the wrong thing to do, and I still feel that way. Considering that almost nobody believes the media as it is, I can't see how lying on purpose can possibly be to anyone's benefit. But Junod claims he did this in order to make people reevaluate how the press covers celebrity, and that's valid. It's valid because conventional celebrity journalism is inevitably hounded by two problems: Either the subject is lying, or the writer is guessing. Junod just happened to embrace both of those obstacles simultaneously.

The problem with interviewing famous people is that—much of the time—they don't know anything. And I don't mean they don't know about religion or world affairs or physics; I mean they don't know anything about what they're supposedly being interviewed about. Quite often, you will see an actor discussing the character he's playing in a certain film, and he'll be explaining what kind of person this character is and what that character represents in a metaphoric sense (this happens all the time on Bravo's

Inside the Actors Studio, America's single most embarrassing TV program). This is crazy. The actor didn't create that character; a screenwriter did. The actor didn't decide what the character represents outside the narrative; that's what the director tries to do. In a big-budget Hollywood movie, the actor has one responsibility: He needs to look visually compelling and recite the lines somebody else wrote for him. That's the whole gig. But in order to promote movies, actors and actresses need to give interviews at press junkets, because nobody wants to read an interview with some nebbish screenwriter. As a consequence, celebrity journalism is usually just attractive people trying to make up answers to questions they barely understand.

But those fabrications are only half the dilemma; part of the blame must fall on the reporter. It's almost impossible for journalists to cover celebrities without collapsing into conjecture. Unless they work for a major magazine or a mammoth newspaper, reporters rarely spend much time with the celebrities they cover; very often, an artist will do eight twenty-minute phone interviews with eight different writers in the span of a single morning, and that's all each writer has to work with. And since this artist probably said the exact same things in all eight interviews, all the writer can do is look at his ten rudimentary quotes and try to figure out how they can be used to prove that this person is somehow interesting.

Great example: In 1998, I interviewed Dave Pirner of the band Soul Asylum. Relative to most alt rockers, he was a pretty good talker; we discussed his liberal political views and the state of the music industry and—very briefly—his defunct relationship with Winona Ryder. All in all, we were on the phone for maybe thirty-five minutes. I started writing my Pirner profile as soon as the call ended, and I found myself using his casual insights to paint an incredibly vivid portrait of both his personal life and the cultural significance of his band. I saw tragic parallels between his ill-fated romance with Ryder and the unavoidable illusion of a meteoric rise to fame, and the whole story turned out to be an amazingly well-constructed psychological profile of a rock star who needed to pass the apex of his fame before he could take the time to appreciate what he had lost. It was a very good story. But then something dawned on me: *What the fuck do I know about David Pirner?* I talked to this dude for thirty-five minutes, and we spent the first ten discussing the coolest bars in uptown Minneapolis. How could I possibly think I gained any meaningful understanding of this man's

existence through one completely innocuous phone conversation? I could have written the whole story without even talking to him, and it wouldn't have been any more (or less) accurate.

But you know what? My deadline for that Soul Asylum piece was 6:00 P.M. that same day, and I came to this realization at around 5:45. I could not change my life (or his) in fifteen minutes. I ran a spell check on the article and sent it to my editor, and then I went home. And everybody read my story, and everybody fucking loved it.

That's celebrity journalism.

IT IS ASSUMED YOU CAN'T READ.

If I have learned anything from working in journalism, it's that people who read newspapers apparently can't read newspapers. That's all I've ever been told. Every discussion I've ever had with an editor has stressed that people despise the process of reading. What people want, I am told, are shorter stories that never jump to a different page (stories that jump to different pages are apparently too confusing for people to follow, although it certainly seems like people manage to comprehend books, which tend to be spread over many, many, many pages). People also like graphics, especially pie graphs. Photographs are also profoundly important, even if it's just a photograph of someone standing in front of the T.G.I. Friday's they happen to manage. And don't forget about sky boxes! People desperately need "sky boxes," which are eye-catching charts that tell them about news stories hidden inside the same paper everyone assumes they don't want to read. HOWEVER, the one thing *nobody* wants is sentences, and they certainly don't want paragraphs. People *despise* paragraphs. Focus groups have proven this.

Let me briefly describe what happened: At some unspecific point in history (during the height of the Vietnam War, probably), the television industry started kicking the newspaper industry's ass, mostly because TV was able to deliver the bare bones of information at a much faster speed. It was like newspapers were a horse and buggy, and TV was a train. So how did newspaper magnates combat this dilemma? By trying to design a really, really fast horse.

What newspapers tried to do was make reading feel like watching TV. Logically, they should have tried to do the opposite; they should have

started writing longer, more complex stories, and they should have tried to deliver all the things the broadcast medium does not have the capacity to offer. But newspapers did the opposite. They tried to compete with the broadcast media by being flashier and less intellectual, which is why the newspaper industry is now controlled by page designers.

Truthfully, I'm not even sure the average consumer knows that people called "page designers" even exist, but these individuals dictate everything you read (and—more to the point— everything you don't). Intellectually, the newspaper industry is now controlled by guys like Mario Garcia, the consultant who redesigned *The Wall Street Journal* when it went to full color in April of 2002. In all likelihood, you have never heard the name Mario Garcia before today—yet he is the kind of man constructing your consciousness.

Here's how the newspaper process operates: Reporters write stories. Those stories are read by midlevel editors who tend to make minor content changes. The stories are then pushed to the "copy desk," where copy editors check for grammar mishaps and factual errors (copy editors also write the headlines). Eventually the stories get to the "design desk," where a page designer decides how to place this information on the tangible paper page—they decide how to incorporate the news alongside the photographs, graphics, sky boxes, and everything else that really doesn't matter. Their goal is to make the page look pretty; they are akin to architects. Quite simply, they are trying to create a newspaper than can be appreciated by the illiterate.

If you subscribe to a daily newspaper, you will notice that— once or twice a year—the paper will run a short story that mentions all the journalism awards that particular newspaper has won in some kind of quasi-notable journalism contest. Editors run these self-congratulatory stories because they think it makes the publication seem credible. However, winning awards in journalism is like winning awards at the Special Olympics; everyone is a winner. Every single person I have ever worked with could technically be classified as "an award-winning journalist," because everyone who enters journalism contests eventually wins *something*. However, these competitions are especially important to page designers. Since the only people who care about newspaper design are other newspaper designers, they are constantly giving awards to each other. And those meaningless plaques and certificates have become the driving force

behind how the world consumes information. When you pick up the front page of any news publication, you are looking at someone's attempt to win a design contest; everything that comprises that page—the words, the images, and even the white spaces between those words and images—are nothing more than props. In the eyes of the modern newspaper designer, all of those elements have equal value. This is not an exaggeration; stroll past any newspaper design desk and you will hear people talking about the “creative use of white space.” This means people are discussing ways to better utilize the parts of the paper that are blank (this includes the gaps between columns and the borders at the top and bottom of a page). Just think about that for a moment: *People are literally discussing the creative significance of nothingness.*⁵

Now, page designers will insist that all they want to do is help writers and that their only true goal is to direct the eyes of readers to the stories they need to see the most. Sometimes I believe them; one of my best friends designs news pages for a living, and he might be the best journalist I've ever met. But good intentions can't compete with bad policy, and that's what the emphasis on newspaper design is. It's now a journalistic philosophy, and it's becoming the dominant one. What's most troubling about the growing influence of newspaper designers is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: As newspapers and magazines become more obsessed with shorter, breezier stories and visual gimmickry, readers adopt that sensibility as normalcy. We are losing the ability to understand anything that's even vaguely complex.

At the moment, the leaders of Knight Ridder and Gannett and Thompson and all the other media chains are wrong; people who buy newspapers can still read them. But give them time. They'll be right soon enough.

1. These are people I would phone immediately if I was diagnosed with lung cancer.

2. These are people whose death from lung cancer would make me profoundly sad.

3. These are people I would generally hope could recover from lung cancer.

[4](#). Obviously, I'm not counting the *New York Post* or *The National Enquirer* or anything else that defines itself as a tabloid, as those publications have no relationship to journalism.

5. Then again, maybe these people are just way Zen.

THE ICE PLANET GOTH

This article is a combination of two forms of quasi-journalism: it's 50 percent a "Look at All These Misplaced Weirdos" story, and it's 50 percent an "Enjoy My Self-Reflexively Peculiar Personal Experience" story.

In many ways, this was among the easiest pieces I ever wrote; all I had to do was show up. One day every year, a whole bunch of goth kids go to Disneyland (partially because they like the iconography, but mostly because it seems like a crazy thing for goth kids to do). As such, these kids really want attention; they were not difficult to find, and it was not difficult to convince them to talk about themselves. I simply spent the day walking up to pasty strangers in black capes and asking them why the fuck they thought Space Mountain was "fabulous."

This was actually the second story I wrote about goths; the first was in Akron, the day after the Columbine school shootings. That, obviously, was a somewhat more serious article, my core thesis being that the overwhelming majority of existing goth kids did not aspire to wear trench coats to biology class before shooting every cheerleader in the face. To me, that was the most insane thing about Columbine: prior to April 20, 1999, it wasn't just that goth kids weren't considered violent; prior to that tragedy, goth kids weren't even considered *scary*. They were just the kids who listened during English class.

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

(DECEMBER 2002)

If you can't find a reason to hate Disneyland, you're just not trying. Like the insincere smile of an aging bank teller, Disneyland represents a contradiction with no discernible upside: it's hokey and archaic, yet gaudy and corporate. It's all kitsch sunshine and crass consumerism, and any self-respecting cynic would despise its existence.

Unless, of course, said cynic enjoys Bauhaus.

Don't let anyone tell you the Age of Irony is over. It's alive and well in California, and here's proof: goth kids love Disneyland. On the final

Sunday of every August, droves of goth-tacular witches and warlocks drive to Anaheim and enter the foreboding inner sanctum of Mickey's Toontown. Welcome to Bats Day in the Fun Park, the annual SoCal collision of goth culture¹ and family fun.

"L.A. goth is very different from goth everywhere else in America," explains Bats Day coordinator and Disney super-fan Noah Korda, the diminutive thirty-one-year-old who spearheads the pilgrimage. "I mean, it's cold everywhere else. In places like Chicago, it's gloomy. But goths in California are mostly happy people. I was just the kind of person who was always interested in creepy crap. For me, this has never been about being sad or alienated."

Bats Day began in 1998. At the time, it was just an excuse to be weird. A few regulars from Hollywood goth clubs like Helter Skelter and Perversion decided to drop acid and walk around Disneyland on a summer afternoon. The following year it was officially dubbed Bats Day, and it has grown ever since. When the sun was at its zenith on August 25 of this year, more than five hundred black-cloaked iconoclasts were tromping around Mickey's playland. It is not, however, a Disney-sanctioned event. "We don't contact the park," says Korda. "And they probably wouldn't care, but just in case, I don't want to give them a chance to come up with a reason to shut it down. But it's got to be pretty obvious that this is going on."

At times during Bats Day, it was impossible to swing a dead cat in Disneyland without hitting a goth (of course, if you had swung a dead cat around Disneyland, a few of these kids probably would have found that awesome). Here's a Dionysian diary from the Day of the Disney Dead.

10:10 A.M.: The sun is already pouring through holes in the powder-blue California sky as I meander through the gates of Disneyland, assaulted on all sides by small children shrieking for merchandise and ice cream. At the point of entry, I see a sign that reads "Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy." I take ten steps into this world and immediately see a man selling overpriced Kodak disposable cameras. Yesterday and tomorrow aren't quite as charming or futuristic as one might anticipate. My suspicion was that 10:00 A.M. would be too early for goth hunting, but there are already dozens of specimens congregating near some poor sap in a Goofy suit, and a few of them are pushing baby carriages and donning mouse ears. I begin chatting with a forty-year-old goth legal

secretary named Crickett Hoffman. I ask her to explain the paradox of supposedly gloomy humans frolicking in the happiest place on earth.

“Goths tend to be kids at heart,” says Hoffman. “When you’re young, you think the goth movement is about depression and alienation. But if goths were really that depressed, there would be no goth movement. They’d all kill themselves.”

10:54 A.M.: Several goths are gawking at a woman portraying Ariel, the chesty little mermaid from that movie about the little mermaid, which I think was called *The Little Mermaid*. Although there are no goths at a nearby headgear outlet called Hatmosphere, I spot several of them wearing newly purchased Captain Hook pirate hats. This prompts me to consider starting work on a nonfiction book titled *Sir Francis Drake: The First Goth?*

11:07 A.M.: My first error: I see a goateed guy wearing a skull T-shirt, accompanied by a black-haired girlfriend with more tattoos than Tupac and a complexion the color of cocaine. I ask him how many years he has participated in Bats Day in the Fun Park, but it turns out he has no idea what I’m talking about. “We just came here for the hell of it,” says twenty-seven-year-old Brandon Stratton. “I had no idea any of this was going on.” Stratton and I then have a brief conversation about Tim Burton movies while his girlfriend stares at me silently, probably fantasizing about how I would look swinging from a gallows.

Noon: The entire goth army convenes at Sleeping Beauty Castle for the first of three group photos, all taken by Noah Korda. While we wait for Korda to organize the sinister posse, I strike up a conversation with Scott McElhaney, a six-foot-two forty-year-old who vaguely resembles Marilyn Manson and has an interesting backstory: After spending twenty-one years in the navy, he has taken a job with a defense contractor, building and testing military infrared sensors. This is an admittedly ungothlike move, but McElhaney says goth-dom was never his bag to begin with. “I don’t think I’m really goth,” he says. “I’m more of a hearse person. But hearse people are certainly sympathetic to the goth sensibilities.” It seems that McElhaney is a member of Phantom Coaches, a subsection of humanity united in their love of cars that tote corpses (McElhaney drives a 1970 hearse with a

Cadillac chassis but concedes that the ultimate ride is the '59 Superior driven by Bud Cort in *Harold and Maude*). However, there is more to Phantom Coaches than just cars: the group also enjoys celebrating Halloween, hanging out in cemeteries, and listening to “gothabilly” music, which is sort of a synthesis of the Stray Cats with Siouxsie and the Banshees. The highlight of our mass photograph in front of the castle is the appearance of Snow White’s nemesis, the Evil Queen, an *über*-wicked woman roundly cheered by hundreds of goth minions who evidently see her as some kind of role model. These guys certainly dig the black-hearted bitches. Moments later, an actress portraying the virginal Snow White tries to get into the picture, and everyone boos her into submission.

12:36 P.M.: “Disney came up with a wonderful idea, and a bunch of other people came in and perverted it,” Krystle Becknauld tells me, finally expressing the kind of goth sentiment I had expected to hear. She is particularly venomous toward Disney’s California Adventure, the modernized, upscale park that lies just south of the original Disneyland. “That other park destroyed this area. Now they have Ferris wheels and cotton candy. Walt Disney never wanted that shit.” Becknauld is a snarked-up, blond eighteen-year-old poised to enter her freshman year at Cal State Long Beach. She walks the park with three males wearing floor-length black leather trench coats. I tell them they are insane, as it is at least 80 degrees and I am sweating through my T-shirt. “Well, of course you are,” one responds. “The sun is beating down on your raw, exposed flesh.”

1:01 P.M.: One of the misconceptions about this culture is that goths are lonely. At Disneyland, the opposite seems to be true: many of these demi-spooks appear to be in successful, mutually necromantic relationships. I ask a group of three happy goth couples to describe the perfect mate, and they all say it’s the person that they’re currently with. I then ask them to pick the celebrity they’d most like to have sex with. The guys choose Rose McGowan. The girls select Peter Murphy.

1:43 P.M.: What do you feed a hungry goth? Apparently, Monte Cristo sandwiches from a restaurant called the Blue Bayou in New Orleans Square. A party of five goths waits for a table in the Blue Bayou’s lobby, and I mention that Disney’s mainstream parkgoers appear oddly unalarmed

by the number of people bumping around in capes and hooded death robes. However, these goths feel differently about the level of tolerance. “I was just in one of the stores,” says twenty-eight-year-old chemist Jennifer Nogle, “and all the normals were asking the staff questions like ‘What’s with these people? Are they part of some weird religion?’ Get real.”

Nogle’s reference to “normals”—goth slang for nongoths—raises an interesting point: people are constantly asking goth kids what makes someone goth. However, an equally valid question is: What makes someone a normal?

“They are not us,” Nogle says with focused conviction. “They wear polo shirts.”

2:50 P.M.: As a single rider on the Indiana Jones Adventure, I am seated next to ... a cute goth teenager! I strike up some winning banter while we wait for the train car to commence rolling.

“So,” I begin, “are you enjoying your day at Disneyland?” Silence.

I try again, this time from a different angle. “So, do you think Marilyn Manson will survive the departure of Twiggy Ramirez? Because I thought that ‘Disposable Teens’ song was tremendous.”

More silence. I am running out of material.

“So,” I ask, “do you think Harrison Ford is goth?”

“Why do you keep talking to me?” she finally says, and suddenly the ride begins. Now it’s too loud to talk. Animated rats are falling from the ceiling of a cave, and I remember that *The Last Crusade* was totally ridiculous.

3:46 P.M.: Things to do in Disneyland if you’re goth:

1. carry a Cure lunchbox as a purse,
2. make devil horns whenever photographed,
3. insist you’re “not really goth.”

4:00 P.M.: The second mass photograph of the day. This one is taken at Tomorrowland, which is how people at Disney during the 1950s saw the future, which means the future now resembles the early 1970s, which means their future is our past, which means Tomorrowland is kind of like *Star Wars*. While Noah Korda snaps a photo of the growing mass of black storm troopers, I ask a pentagram-tattooed woman named Linda Knowles

whether she felt ostracized by the 1999 Columbine school shootings, an event wrongly blamed on the goth subculture. To my surprise, she felt even more ostracized after September 11. “I was in a grocery store in Laguna [California] right after September 11, and I was wearing a T-shirt from Salem, Massachusetts, because my husband and I had just been there for vacation,” Knowles says. “And this woman points to me and says, ‘You’re one of those witches! Osama bin Laden was a fall guy. It was the witches who blew up the Twin Towers!’ So, obviously, there is still some prejudice against the goth lifestyle.”

5:32 P.M.: Five goths convince me to go on Splash Mountain with them. This is one of those rides where you sit in a log and get completely soaked, which I normally disdain. But I’ve never seen wet goths before, so I go along for the trip.

I find myself inside a log on an underground river. Everything smells like chlorine and Hot Topic. The girls in front of me are giggling at the animatronic rabbits surrounding us, and I find myself thinking, *How did America become terrified of these people?* Two trench coat-cloaked kids in Colorado may have become twisted killing machines and ruined it for everybody else, but these goths are the kind of folk who laugh at fur-covered robots. The ride concludes when the log plummets fifty feet into a mini tsunami. I bid my soaked new-found acquaintances good-bye as they reapply their makeup.

7:20 P.M.: I hate to keep beating a dead jackal, but the logic behind goth summer fashion is profoundly fucked up. Why would anybody wear a black sweatshirt in August? Why would people who live in Southern California drape themselves in black velvet, unless they were appearing in an Alannah Myles video? The goth movement would be better off had it flourished in Iceland. If Björk had made a record about vampires instead of polar bears, the world would certainly be less sweaty.

7:45 P.M.:

Q: How do you make fifty goth kids sprint across Disneyland?

A: Put up a sign that says “Smoking Section.”

There are only three smoking sections here at Disney, and they all look like backstage at a Sisters of Mercy concert. Apparently, the Marlboro Man

is pretty goddamn goth.

8:00 P.M.: As night falls on the Disneyland Park, the entire Bats Day flock of five hundred descends like locusts on the Haunted Mansion for a final snapshot. It's impossible to ignore how happy they all seem—smiling, talking on cell phones, and joking about watching *The Crow* and drinking hemlock. And something becomes completely clear: for the first time in a long time, a lot of these goths feel comfortable and accepted. Today, they are the insiders. They are the people who can sarcastically point at others with impunity; they are the freaks who took over; they are, quite suddenly, the normals. When the tapestry of alienation becomes the status quo, disaffection merely becomes fashion. It's a goth world after all.

1. Few subcultures are as visually distinct—or as publicly misrepresented—as the goth movement. Part fashion and part philosophy, “gothness” is preoccupied with all things lugubrious. Goth icons can be traced through the centuries (Edgar Allan Poe, Hammer Film Productions, Black Sabbath), but the scene fomented around punks like Siouxsie and the Banshees and “Bela Lugosi’s Dead,” the 1979 debut single by English glam ghouls Bauhaus. Best known for vocalist Peter Murphy’s craven caterwaul, Bauhaus inspired a generation of bands like the Sisters of Mercy and Mission U.K. (and legendary London club the Batcave). The fans were easily identifiable—pale, stoic, and dressed completely in black. Goth became commercially viable during the mid-’80s with the success of the Cure. Its popularity exploded in the ’90s, when it merged with metal and industrial dance music, spawning Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson. These “angry” goths typified modern dark-side culture and were branded enemies of society—when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot their classmates at Columbine High School, they were characterized as “goth” only because they wore the uniform.

FIVE INTERESTING CORPSES

I write about dead people. A lot. However, I always seem to end up writing about how certain individuals' deaths inadvertently reflect some abstract trend in society they never consciously embodied. Is this how dead people want to be remembered? Probably not. But I guess this is how those of us who stay alive try to make a living.

THE RATT TRAP

(DECEMBER 2002)

Dee Dee Ramone and Robbin Crosby were both shaggy-haired musicians who wrote aggressive music for teenagers. Both were unabashed heroin addicts. Neither was the star of his respective band: Dee Dee played bass for the Ramones, a seminal late-'70s punk band; Crosby played guitar for Ratt, a seminal early-'80s heavy-metal band. They died within twenty-four hours of each other last spring, and each had only himself to blame for the way he perished. In a macro sense, they were symmetrical, self-destructive clones; for anyone who isn't obsessed with rock 'n' roll, they were basically the same guy.

Yet anyone who is obsessed with rock 'n' roll would define these two humans as diametrically different. To rock aficionados, Dee Dee and the Ramones were "important" and Crosby and Ratt were not. We are all supposed to concede this. We are supposed to know that the Ramones saved rock 'n' roll by fabricating their surnames, sniffing glue, and playing consciously unpolished three-chord songs in the Bowery district of New York. We are likewise supposed to acknowledge that Ratt sullied rock 'n' roll by abusing hairspray, snorting cocaine, and playing highly produced six-chord songs on Hollywood's Sunset Strip.

There is no denying that the Ramones were a beautiful idea. It's wrong to claim that they invented punk, but they certainly came the closest to idealizing what most people agree punk is supposed to sound like. They wrote the same two-minute song over and over and over again—unabashedly, for twenty years—and the relentlessness of their riffing made

certain people feel like everything about the world had changed forever. And perhaps those certain people were right. However, those certain people remain alone in their rightness, because the Ramones were never particularly popular.

The Ramones never made a platinum record over the course of their entire career. Bands like the Ramones don't make platinum records; that's what bands like Ratt do. And Ratt was quite adroit at that task, doing it four times in the 1980s. The band's first album, *Out of the Cellar*, sold more than a million copies in four months. Which is why the deaths of Dee Dee Ramone and Robbin Crosby created such a mathematical paradox: the demise of Ramone completely overshadowed the demise of Crosby, even though Crosby cowrote a song ("Round and Round") that has probably been played on FM radio and MTV more often than every track in the Ramones' entire catalogue. And what's weirder is that no one seems to think this imbalance is remotely strange.

What the parallel deaths of Ramone and Crosby prove is that it really doesn't matter what you do artistically, nor does it matter how many people like what you create; what matters is who likes what you do artistically and what liking that art is supposed to say about who you are. Ratt was profoundly uncool (read: populist) and the Ramones were profoundly significant (read: interesting to rock critics). Consequently, it has become totally acceptable to say that the Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" changed your life; in fact, saying that would define you as part of a generation that became disenfranchised with the soullessness of suburbia, only to rediscover salvation through the integrity of simplicity. However, it is laughable to admit (without irony) that Ratt's "I Want a Woman" was your favorite song in 1989; that would mean you were stupid, and that your teenage experience meant nothing, and that you probably had a tragic haircut.

The reason Crosby's June 6 death was mostly ignored is that his band seemed corporate and fake and pedestrian; the reason Ramone's June 5 death will be remembered is that his band was seen as representative of a counterculture that lacked a voice. The contradiction is that countercultures get endless media attention: the only American perspectives thought to have any meaningful impact are those that come from the fringes. The voice of the counterculture is, in fact, inexplicably deafening. Meanwhile, mainstream culture (i.e., the millions and millions of people who bought

Ratt albums merely because that music happened to be the soundtrack for their lives) is usually portrayed as an army of mindless automatons who provide that counterculture with something to rail against. The things that matter to normal people are not supposed to matter to smart people.

Now, I know what you're thinking; you're thinking I'm overlooking the obvious, which is that the Ramones made "good music" and Ratt made "bad music," and that's the real explanation as to why we care about Dee Dee's passing while disregarding Robbin's. And that rebuttal makes sense, I suppose, if you're the kind of person who honestly believes the concept of "good taste" is anything more than a subjective device used to create gaps in the intellectual class structure. I would argue that Crosby's death was actually a more significant metaphor than Ramone's, because Crosby was the first major hair-metal artist from the Reagan years to die from AIDS. The genre spent a decade consciously glamorizing (and aggressively experiencing) faceless sex and copious drug use; it will be interesting to see whether the hesher casualties now start piling up. Meanwhile, I don't know if Ramone's death was a metaphor for anything; he's just a good guy who died on his couch from shooting junk. But as long as you have the right friends, your funeral will always matter a whole lot more.

HOW REAL IS REAL?

(DECEMBER 2004)

If the appreciation of reality-based entertainment can be broken into two classes—and at the moment, it seems like everything in America is destined to be broken into two classes—there is no clearer schism than a movie like *Swimming to Cambodia* and a TV show like MTV's *The Real World*. On the celluloid of the former, you find a darkly insightful, tragically neurotic, blue-state intellectual trying to explain why his own life is unfathomable. On the videotape of the latter, you find drunken red-state coeds who allegedly represent the totality of their generation. They seem to derive from two totally different places; many of the people saddened by the death of Spalding Gray wouldn't even know who *Real World* cocreator Mary-Ellis Bunion was (and certainly not that she died earlier this year). Yet the philosophical dissonance between these two is less than logic might dictate;

both found entertainment within the banality of everyday life, and both saw meaningful drama in the ostensibly undramatic.

Gray may not have invented the monological art, but he certainly did it better than anyone else who tried. He was just an odd man talking about his own trivialities, but it sometimes felt like a person twisting (and ripping) his subconscious mind in public. He was never enigmatic about his potential for suicide; he wrote about those increasingly dark fantasies as overtly as possible. In 1997's *It's a Slippery Slope*, Gray superficially wrote about learning to ski but mostly wrote about the affair that ended his first marriage; early in the monologue, he finds himself pacing around Washington Square Park and thinking about the woman who would eventually become his mistress. But even those thoughts inexplicably turn morbid: "Should I call her?" he wondered. "Should I 'touch base' with her? Drop in for some tea? And I'm dwelling on the fact that I'm going to turn fifty-two, and I'm thinking about Mom, and how she committed suicide at fiftytwo, and did that mean I was gonna do it, too?"

As it turns out, Gray lasted ten years longer than his mother, ultimately plunging off the Staten Island Ferry in January. Retrospectively, the conditions of his suicide seem so predictable they almost feel unoriginal. Yet—somehow—it was still a shock to hear that this had happened, and that Gray had actually done what he always suggested; for days after his disappearance, people optimistically speculated that Gray was merely researching his next book and would emerge unscathed. And this is the fundamental paradox of Gray's life and death: no matter how intimately an artist expresses his own unhappiness, we always assume he's still a *character*. Spalding Gray's genius was that he could make his external monologues sound like internal dialogues; his genius derived from his authenticity, and that authenticity was the reason he could sit behind a table and talk solipsistically for ninety minutes without ever seeming dull. It was his authenticity that made him entertaining. But it still didn't make people believe what he was saying. It didn't matter how many times Gray stared into the eyes of his audience and essentially said, "*I am going to kill myself.*" Somehow, that sentiment merely seemed funny.

What's retroactively noteworthy about Gray's performance technique—the process of sitting in a chair and emoting directly into a camera—is how it's become the most omnipresent expository device on television. This is how we are supposed to understand the true nature of the people on reality

TV: throughout every episode of virtually every show, cast members confess their feelings to an unresponsive video lens, telling us who they love and who they hate and what makes them sad or happy or annoyed. This is how the plot moves. That narrative style was essentially introduced to mainstream television by Mary-Ellis Bunim, who coconstructed MTV's *The Real World* in 1992 and went on to make programs like *Road Rules*, *Making the Band*, and the wildly successful, vaguely depressing Paris Hilton vehicle *The Simple Life*. Bunim died in late January, succumbing to breast cancer at the age of fifty-seven. Her illness and her passing were weirdly private; I use the modifier “weirdly” because that level of discretion—and the very real tragedy that was cloaked behind it—was the antithesis of what made her TV work so influential and compelling.

Bunim started her career making soap operas; she was the executive producer for daytime series like *As The World Turns* and *Santa Barbara*. The plan for *The Real World* was to craft soap opera storylines with actual people; though shot in a documentary style, the motivation was different than traditional documentary filmmaking. The twentysomethings cast on *The Real World* were not complex subjects meant to be uncovered and examined; they were supposed to be archetypes of youth culture, and they were supposed to make the melodramatic choices (and exhibit the melodramatic behavior) that would drive a serial TV program. They were supposed to be hyperreal versions of who they already were. What they did, ultimately, was unknowingly embody the same aesthetic Spalding Gray invented when he first became a monologist. “I became a kind of inverted Method Actor,” Gray wrote. “I was using myself to play myself. [It was] a kind of creative narcissism.”

There is no better description of what it means to appear on reality TV than those two sentences.

Part of what made Bunim's *Real World* so polarizing was its name—by actively using the word *real* in the title, it immediately made critics want to question the veracity of every plot. By now, everyone knows that unseen editors have more control over the story than the on-screen participants; unlike Gray, the crux of Bunim's success was not built on authenticity. However, the question of what is (and isn't) real is still there, and it's the reason why imperfect fact will always be more interesting than flawless fiction. We are addicted to blurry lines. In his one-man film *Monster in a Box*, Spalding Gray sits next to a huge manuscript, the unabridged pages of

his novel *Impossible Vacation*. The book is fiction, but—by all accounts—it’s almost completely autobiographical. Throughout *Monster in a Box*, Gray points to sections of the text and describes the condition of his life during the writing of each particular passage. In other words, he talks about his real life while explaining why it was difficult to write an unreal version of his real life. It is a nonfiction movie about the writing of a fictional book that was actually true. And as a result, we kind of believe everything, and we kind of believe nothing. We believe, I suppose, whatever we want. Which is why the suicide of Spalding Gray still seemed shocking (even though it wasn’t), and it’s why Mary-Ellis Bunim’s *Real World* never seems real (even though it is).

THE TENTH BEATLE

(DECEMBER 2005)

The Beatles are the most famous rock group who existed, or will ever exist. They are, in fact, the second-most famous four-human collective within any context whatsoever (the four Gospel writers are number one; Notre Dame’s 1924 Four Horsemen backfield rank a distant third). Moreover, the Beatles are the only band whose population is central to their iconography: John, Paul, George, and Ringo shall always be the Fab Four. And because that number is so important (and so finite), pop historians have spent the last thirty-five years trying to decide who deserves classification as Beatle Number Five. Pete Best was the group’s original drummer, so he usually gets to be the Fifth Beatle. Producer George Martin had almost as much sonic impact as the guys in the band, so he warrants credit as the Sixth Beatle. Stuart Sutcliffe played bass with Long John and the Silver Beatles in 1960, influenced the group’s fashion aesthetic, and even had a movie made about his tragic life (1994’s *Backbeat*); he’s the Seventh Beatle. Journeyman musician Billy Preston is credited on some studio albums and performs live with the band in the documentary *Let It Be*, so he’s (at worst) Beatle Number Eight. When Ringo Starr had tonsillitis in 1964, he was temporarily replaced by the Ninth Beatle, an easygoing fellow named Jimmy Nichol. Which brings us to Eric Griffiths, a man with the curious legacy of being “The Tenth Beatle.”

In 1957, Griffiths and John Lennon were acquaintances at the state grammar school Quarry Bank; they sometimes smoked cigarettes and discussed the possibility of starting a band with anyone they could find who happened to own an instrument. The goal was to play skiffle, a rudimentary musical genre that fused folk with jazz, blues, and country. Working out of Griffiths's home, the pair organized the lineup and arranged the songs. Originally called the Blackjacks, their loose cooperative would evolve into the Quarrymen. By the fall of 1960, the Quarrymen had become the Beatles. But Griffiths was already gone, his role as collaborator usurped by the younger, cuter, more talented Paul McCartney. Ironically, Griffiths would later claim that Lennon was initially threatened by McCartney and wanted to start a different band without him, but Griffiths convinced him otherwise; if this is true, one could argue that Eric Griffiths *saved* the Beatles.

There are conflicting accounts about why Griffiths never became a full-fledged Beatle. The first theory is that he was asked to become the bassist when George Harrison joined the group, but Griffiths could not afford (or did not want) to purchase a bass and amplifier. The second story (as explained in Bob Spitz's biography *The Beatles*) is that John and Paul silently fired him; they scheduled a rehearsal at McCartney's home and simply never invited him (Griffiths deduced his expulsion when he unknowingly phoned the house in the middle of the rehearsal). Either way, Griffiths's brief tenure and ignominious departure illustrates the abject weirdness of being a human footnote: he is now best known for *not* being involved with something. His celebrity only serves to validate just how famous the Beatles were (and are): the Beatles were so famous that Griffiths is notable merely for having known them.

How much this turn of events hurt Griffiths remains open to debate. He certainly never stopped thinking about the past; after a long career in the British prison industry, he reunited several of the original Quarrymen in the late '90s and recorded a skiffle album titled *Get Back Together*. One can only assume he spent a lot of decades dreaming of an alternative reality where he cowrote "Please Please Me" and fled from hordes of screaming teenage girls in cat's-eye glasses. When Lennon was murdered in 1980 and Harrison passed in 2001, we were all reminded of how their lives changed the world; when Eric Griffiths died from pancreatic cancer last January, we were only reminded of the life he never had.

HERE'S "JOHNNY"

(APRIL 2005)

Celebrity deaths rarely affect me emotionally. However, I was pretty chagrined when Johnny Carson died in January. I don't recall liking him (or even consistently watching him) that much when he was still on TV, but I enjoy thinking about him now; he suddenly seems more compelling, somehow. This being the case, I read a lot of his obituaries (of which there were about four thousand), and I kept seeing the same message delivered over and over again: "There will never be another guy like Johnny Carson." This was expressed in different ways and through different means, but the core premise was always the same—Carson was this unique, original voice who represented a certain brand of understated comedic dignity, and no one will ever be that person again. And (maybe) this is true. But I don't think so. I think there could be another person like Johnny Carson, or at least another person who possesses his collection of qualities. What there will never again be is a *thing* that's like "Johnny Carson." And the reason I put Carson's name in quotes is because the idea of "Johnny Carson" is much different than who he actually was as a person. What this means is that another Johnny Carson could exist, but no one would care (or at least not as much). And this is not because society changed, and it's not because our values are different; this is because we all possess the ability to stop "Johnny Carson" from happening, and that is exactly what we choose to do. And this makes us consciously happier, but unconsciously sadder.

Choice makes us depressed.

We just don't realize it.

Certainly, I am not the first person who ever suggested this hypothesis. A professor of social theory at Swarthmore College, Barry Schwartz, recently wrote a book (*The Paradox of Choice*) that suggests "the culture of abundance robs us of satisfaction." Schwartz is a critic of what's referred to as "choice overload"; he thinks that walking into a store and having thirteen different options for uncooked pasta or eighty potential alternatives for a new cell phone injects an extra level of stress into an otherwise simple transaction. However, that problem is not what I'm talking about, because I don't worry about stress. What I worry about is something *The Paradox of Choice* only touches on tangentially—the loss of shared experience. The

reason Johnny Carson was important was not because he was funny or clever or cool, even though he was all of those things; the reason he was important was because he was the last universally shared icon of modern popular culture.

I do not know one person who grew up during the 1960s or '70s who wasn't intimately aware of who Johnny Carson was and what Johnny Carson did. In a way, he seemed more famous than everybody. It did not matter if he was entertaining or not, and it did not matter how much you liked him. Even if you were consciously watching something else at 11:00 P.M., you were ultimately just *not* watching *The Tonight Show*. I recall an episode of *Alice* where Vic Tayback (that was the bald guy who played Mel) briefly did a semifaitful impersonation of Johnny Carson, even though *Alice* was on CBS and *The Tonight Show* was on NBC. One could argue that the single most memorable line of Jack Nicholson's career was when he mocked Ed McMahon in *The Shining*. "Johnny Carson" was, almost in totality, the entire construction of watching television late at night. Everybody knew this, even if they didn't own a television. It was a specific piece of knowledge that all Americans had in common.

Obviously, that could never happen today. There will never again be "cultural knowledge" that everybody knows, mostly because there is simply too much culture to know about. A few years ago, the OutKast song "Hey Ya!" was wildly popular, and it seemed to have an uncommon social reach; white people liked it, black people liked it, advertisers liked it, communists liked it, kite enthusiasts liked it, etc. etc. etc. I recall having a conversation with a bunch of rock critics who kept referring to this as "The 'Hey Ya!' Moment," when everyone alive seemed to be simultaneously connected through a pop single. However, I can think of fifty people *I know personally* who have never heard of OutKast or listened to "Hey Ya!" nor could they recognize what this tune sounds like or have even a rudimentary conversation about its popularity. "Hey Ya!" was the most universally appreciated song of the past ten years, but it was still a niche phenomenon; in order to know about OutKast, you had to care about music. This was not the case with Carson. To care about "Johnny Carson," all you had to do was be alive. There was nothing else to know about it.

Now, don't confuse my argument with the notion of nostalgia, because nostalgia is not what I am writing about. I don't want to go back in time. I do not want fewer options. I get two hundred channels through my cable

service, but I would like two hundred more. If I could magically create a situation where the Rolling Stones had recorded ten studio albums with Mick Taylor instead of five, I would create this situation immediately. In the present tense, we always want the maximum number of alternatives; in the short term, choice improves our lives, and we're completely aware of that. The problematic rub is that—over time—choice isolates us. We have fewer shared experiences, and that makes us feel alone. The proliferation of choice makes us feel vaguely alienated, and that makes us depressed. But this relationship is not something we're conscious of, because it seems crazy to attribute loneliness to freedom. We just think we're inexplicably less happy than we should be.

Yet this sadness is not so inexplicable.

In his new book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell adroitly writes about how our attitudes about things like race and morality operate on two levels: The conscious (i.e., “apartheid is wrong,”

“all people are equal”), and the unconscious (i.e., our immediate, visceral associations that occur before we can edit our internal thought process). Our emotional relationship with choice works in a similar fashion. In 2002, I interviewed Aerosmith's Steven Tyler about drugs and groupies, and he said something along the lines of, “Having sex with the same woman a thousand times is way more interesting than having a thousand one-night stands with a thousand different women, because those one-night stands are all the same.” This is the kind of platitude rock stars say all the time; in fact, I am forced to paraphrase it from memory, because that sentiment was too clichéd to include in the article. Every aging rock god (except maybe Gene Simmons) eventually comes to this same conclusion; in fact, anyone (famous or not) who decides to get married is unknowingly agreeing with Steven Tyler. At some point, most people decide that sleeping with the same person improves the quality of their life, even though it eliminates romantic choice. We all unconsciously understand this. However, nobody consciously believes this is true until *after the fact*. If you ask any single man if he'd prefer to (a) have sex with a thousand different women or (b) have sex with one woman a thousand times, he will always take option “a,” even though he knows this decision is virtually guaranteed to make him feel awkward and alone. In the present tense, we always want as much individual choice as possible; once that present has passed, we're happier if we've experienced the same limited options as everyone else.

If you're having drinks with a stranger in a bar and "Swallowed" comes on the jukebox, and you say, "You know, this is the one Bush song I like," and the guy you're talking to says, "Yes, this is probably as good as any Pixies song," you will immediately like this guy more. If you then stroll over to some girl and mention that you just happened to see Lars von Trier's *The Five Obstructions*, and she says, "That is my favorite self-reflexive Danish documentary of the past five years," the odds of you kissing this woman immediately increase 40 percent. If you then sit down at a table with five bozos who are intensely discussing the 1985 Atlanta Hawks—and you just happened to have had a poster of Dominique Wilkins on your wall when you were in junior high—you will immediately feel more comfortable. This is not the purpose of art and culture, but it's probably the biggest social benefit; these shared experiences are how we connect with other people, and it's how we understand our own identity. However, all the examples I mentioned are specific and personal; they are only pockets of a shared existence. They are things individual people choose to understand, and finding others who understand them equally are products of coincidence. But "Johnny Carson" was not. "Johnny Carson" was the last thing that everybody understood, even if they didn't try. Which is why we may have another Johnny Carson, but we'll never have another "Johnny Carson." When given the choice, we'd all rather be happy now ... even if that guarantees we'll all be sad later.

Q: It is 1933. You are in Berlin, Germany. Somehow, you find yourself in a position where you can effortlessly steal Adolf Hitler's wallet. This theft will not effect Hitler's rise to power, the nature of World War II, or the Holocaust. There is no important identification in the wallet, but the act will cost Hitler forty Reichsmarks and completely ruin his evening. You do not need the money. The odds that you will be caught committing this crime are less than 2 percent.

Are you ethically obligated to steal Hitler's wallet?

PIRATES

We all want things. We all need things. We all want to need things, and we all need to want them. This is not double-talk; this is truth. America is traditionally perceived as a consumer culture, but it's really more of an *acquisition* culture. Though there is a certain kind of personality who finds satisfaction in the process of buying things, there is a rapidly expanding populace who prefers *taking* things. In 1990, Sinéad O'Connor claimed, "I do not want what I haven't got." That was her core aesthetic. And this is why you never see Sinéad O'Connor on *TRL*. It has nothing to do with her being a thirty-six-year-old, bald, anti-Catholic intermittent lesbian who liked to sing about Argentina. That stuff didn't hurt her career at all.

What hurt her career is that Sinéad would make a horrible pirate.

Maybe you haven't noticed, but—as a society—we are completely immersed in a pirate renaissance. At the moment, there is nothing cooler than pirates. This sort of thing happens periodically; in the middle 1980s, you may recall a ninja renaissance. That was a dynamic era in contemporary history, punctuated by films like *Ninja Academy*, *American Ninja*, and *Ninja Phantom Heroes U.S.A.*, not to mention the popularity of the GI Joe action figure Storm Shadow, a conflicted snow ninja who joined the terrorist Cobra regime to avenge his uncle's death.

Now, the reason behind the rise in ninja power was always completely clear: the faceless stealth and autonomous freedom of the "rogue ninja" symbolized the last bastions of counterculture within the bloated corporate commercialism of Reagan-era autocracy. We loved ninjas for the same reasons we loved Hüsker Dü, the USFL, and the early work of Jason Bateman¹ (particularly his NBC sitcom *It's Your Move*). The ninja could never be tamed; the ninja gave us hope. Things aren't so cut-and-dried with this twenty-first-century pirate rediscovery. It has more to do with moral decline and personal psychology (and particularly how those morals and psychologies have changed with technology).

Last January, I happened to be in England during Super Bowl XXXVII, the first all-pirate championship of the modern era. As you may recall, the Buccaneers defeated the Raiders. This prompted a very thin, moderately

intoxicated Londoner named Nona to ask me a question: “Does every American football team have a pirate-oriented nickname?”

“Of course not,” I said in response. “It’s not like we’re Canadians. We don’t randomly refer to every single franchise as ‘the Roughriders’ for no apparent reason. We are wholly democratic! Pirates are only one delicious slice of Americana.” I then asked this woman if every movie made in Britain was exactly like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. She said “sort of.” At the time, it seemed like a wholly forgettable conversation. Yet weeks later, I could not get this woman out of my mind. *Nona, I’m out of my head without you*, I thought to myself, particularly when I listened to track five of Mötley Crüe’s *Girls, Girls, Girls* album. And this was not for any prurient reason; this was because Nona seemed to understand something about my homeland that I did not. In the months that followed, I started looking for elements of pirate iconography in daily American life. And they were absolutely everywhere.

The most obvious example was the success of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, a film where Johnny Depp acts like Keith Richards on the *Goats Head Soup* tour and subsequently comes across as the coolest person who ever lived. But this is only the most overt example. Darryl Hannah wears an eyepatch in *Kill Bill*. National “talk like a pirate day” (September 19) has become more popular than both Groundhog Day and Rosh Hashanah. *Los Angeles Times* journalist Sue Carpenter has written a book called *40 Watts from Nowhere: A Journey into Pirate Radio*. Paul McCartney married a woman with only one leg. And perhaps most curious, postironic literary whiz kid Dave Eggers has opened a pirate store in San Francisco. I’m completely serious about this; it’s a store that sells authentic pirate paraphernalia (and also doubles as a grade-school tutoring center).

“Everybody seems to think they can relate to being a pirate,” says thirty-two-year-old pirate store manager Yosh Han. “Not everyone can relate to being a cowboy or a circus clown, but there is a pirate within all of us. It’s more global, and pirates have that underdog appeal.”

Here is where things get tricky: as described by Han, it would seem that the word *pirate* has a positive connotation. However, pirates were—by and large—mediocre citizens. David Cordingly (a man who actively bills himself as “the world’s foremost expert on pirates”) wrote a book called *Under the Black Flag*, and the text details a bizarre buccaneer torture practice of slashing a prisoner’s stomach, extracting the end of one

intestine, nailing it to a post, and then forcing the victim to “dance to his death” by beating his ass with a burning log. This strikes me as unnecessary. And it’s not like pirating is dead, either: the International Chamber of Commerce (located in Kuala Lumpur) reported 469 pirate attacks in the year 2000, resulting in 72 deaths. So doesn’t this qualify pirates as “not altogether groovy”? Shouldn’t this make us perceive pirates as bad?

“Yes and no,” Han says semi-cryptically. “Certainly, pirate history isn’t always positive. But the idea of being free ... that’s a very pirate-oriented ideal. There is just this growing belief that some things should be free—and if those things are not free, they should be taken.”

Here is where things become a little more clear: the new-found rise in pirate adoration might be a newfound adoration for theft, which undoubtedly comes from file sharing. Because—when push comes to shove—we all know file sharing *is* theft. I realize there are pundits who try to disagree with that assertion, but you can always tell who these people are; these are people who start their argument by saying “File sharing is a complex issue.” File sharing is not a complex issue. There is nothing complex about it. If you are able to get Metallica’s “Whiplash” over the Internet, and you aren’t paying anyone for this song, and you don’t own the copyright to this song, *you have stolen it*. You got something for nothing, and that’s what stealing is. And I’m not saying you shouldn’t do this, nor am I saying that I’ve never done this, nor am I suggesting that I even care if the entire music industry collapses. But don’t kid yourself—it *is* stealing. It *is* piracy. And that’s precisely why people find themselves wanting to see Johnny Depp wielding a cutlass and talking to a parrot.

There’s an interesting new book by David Callahan called *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*. The manuscript’s premise is that modern people—and particularly people who attend prestigious New York high schools, it seems—see almost no difference between “being smart” and “cheating creatively.” And this is not a commentary on situations like Enron; that’s corporate intrusion, which has none of the cavalier cache of the lone rascal. This is all about the individual. Callahan ultimately expresses an antichecking worldview, but even he dubs anyone who doesn’t cheat a “chump”: you are a chump if you pay your taxes, you are a chump if you never lie, and you are a chump if you still pay full price for CDs. That is the modern paradigm. This is why

we love pirates: *we have to*. The only options are to be “pro-pirate” or “pro-chump.” We are pirates by default. And this is depressing (or at least it is to me). How I long for those bygone days of adoring ninjas!

Argh.

—*Esquire*, 2003

[1](#). I wrote this before the creation of *Arrested Development*, so this reference did not seem so clichéd and obvious at the time.

Q: Let us assume you have the ability to telekinetically change culture while you actively experience it. Your mind can now dictate what you see and hear. For example, if you were listening to Pearl Jam's *Yield* and you wanted the music to be heavier, it would immediately sound as though Mike McCready's guitar had been tuned differently in the studio. If you were watching *The Office* on NBC and decided that Jim should marry Pam (or Karen, or both), you could make it happen—all you would need to do is think about that specific desire. You could stare at an oil painting and unconsciously change the color contrasts. If a PG-13 romantic comedy grew dull, you could force it to evolve into an eroticized NC-17 thriller. You could (essentially) write books as you read them, eliminating certain characters and redirecting plot points as they occurred in the text. However, such changes would only apply to *your* experience; you could kill off Han Solo at the end of *Return of the Jedi*, but that would not change the movie for anyone else. All other people would possess the same personal telekinetic powers as you.

Would you want this? And—if this became reality—would art retain any meaning whatsoever?

PONG x INFINITY

There are still people in America who do not take video games seriously. These are the same people who question the relevance of hip-hop and assume newspapers will still exist in twenty-five years. It's hard to find an irrefutably accurate statistic for the economic value of the gaming industry, but the best estimates seem to be around \$28 billion; I do know that whenever I lecture at college campuses the audience's engagement with video games is almost always 100 percent. As such, I'm not going to waste any space trying to convince people that video games are important. If you're reading this column, I'm just going to concede that you believe video games in 2006 are the cultural equivalent to rock music in 1967 because that's (more or less) reality.

Okay!

So we all agree that video games are this consequential force, right? And we all assume that these games have a meaning, and that they reflect the world views and sensibilities of their audience. Right? And anyone who has played modern video games (or has even just been in the same room with someone who was) has undoubtedly noticed that games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *The Warriors* and *Bad Day L.A.* are transfixing to look at because the visual images are often beautiful and the movements of the on-screen characters are weird and hyper-real. Everyone seems to agree that all of those notions are true. Which prompts me to ask the following question: Why are there no video game critics?¹

Now, I realize there are already numerous people writing video game reviews and that there are entire magazines and myriad Web sites devoted to this subject. But what these people are writing is not really *criticism*. Almost without exception, it's exclusively consumer advice; it tells you what old game a new game is similar to, and what the playing experience entails, and how commercially successful the game will (or will not) be. It's expository information. As far as I can tell, there is no major critic who specializes in explaining what playing a given game *feels* like, nor is anyone analyzing what specific games *mean* in any context outside of the game itself. There is no Pauline Kael of video game writing; there is no

Lester Bangs² of video game writing. And I'm starting to suspect there will *never* be that kind of authoritative critical voice within the world of video games, which is interesting for a lot of reasons.

This is not a simple mystery to solve: it's hard enough to figure out why something does exist, but it's even harder to figure out why something *doesn't* exist. As an entry point, I contacted Steven Johnson, the author of *Everything Bad Is Good For You* (one of the only mainstream books that comes remotely close to the kind of gaming criticism I described in the previous paragraph). Johnson mostly attributed the void to mechanics. "Games can't be analyzed using the aesthetic tools we've developed to evaluate narrative art forms like books or films," he explained via e-mail. "Video games generally have narratives and some kind of character development, but—almost without exception—these are the *least* interesting things about them. Gamers don't play because they're drawn into the storyline; they play because there's something intoxicating about the mix of exploring an environment and solving problems. The stories are an afterthought."

This is all completely true. However, I don't think it necessarily explains why video game criticism doesn't exist. When someone reviews *Moby-Dick* or *Kramer vs. Kramer*, they don't spend most of their time explaining the details of the plot (or at least they don't if they're interesting). Were I to write about Steely Dan's *Gaucha* or The Sword's *Age of Winters*, I wouldn't spend the entire review discussing the sequencing of the tracks or the clarity of the lyrical development. The meanings to most art is usually found within abstractions. So the problem is not that video games don't have interesting narratives; the problem is that it's hard to decide what it is about video games that *is* interesting. "[We] need to talk about games in a way that is appropriate to the medium," says Johnson. "In some cases, they're closer to architecture."

Here again, Johnson is right. But there's one (rather obvious) difference between architecture and video games: architecture is static. I live in a building composed of fourteen floors, and that is always true for everyone who sees it. I can't manipulate the floor plan of my apartment building. And what makes video game criticism complex is that its action is almost never static; it's hard to classify what games are supposed to mean because that meaning is unique to every player. Unlike movies or music or TV, the artist can't control what random people do with their art.

Look at it like this: near the end of *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara asks Rhett Butler what she's supposed to do with the rest of her life, and he says that (frankly) he doesn't give a damn. Now, the meaning of this dialogue can be interpreted in many ways. However, what if this exchange only happened *sometimes*? What if this on-screen exchange was totally different for every individual person who watched *Gone With the Wind*? What if Rhett occasionally changed his mind and walked back into the house and said, "Just kidding, baby"? What if Scarlett suddenly murdered Butler for acting too cavalier? What if their conversation was sometimes interrupted by a bear attack? And what if all these alternative realities were dictated by the audience itself, all at the same time? If *Gone With the Wind* ended differently every time it was experienced, it would change the way critics viewed its message. The question would not be "What does this mean?" The question would be "What *could* this mean?"

That, I think, is the direction video game criticism should be evolving toward: the significance of potentiality. Video games provide an opportunity to write about the cultural consequence of free will, an idea that would comment upon the consumer as much as the art form. However, it is unlikely that this evolution will happen, mostly because there are no current writers who could evolve into these theoretical "potentiality critics." Video game criticism can't evolve because video game criticism can't even get started.

"It's weird that *Entertainment Weekly* doesn't have a video game column, and that *The New York Times* only writes about gaming sporadically," says Henry Jenkins, a professor of comparative media at M.I.T. and the author of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. "Aesthetic criticism exists in this industry, but only as arguments among gaming scholars and game creators. And the gaming industry suffers because of that. There is a very conservative element to gaming because absolutely *everything* is built around consumerism. Game designers are asking themselves questions about how a game should look and what it should do, but not about what the game is supposed to mean."

And that—ultimately—is why the lack of video game criticism is a problem. If nobody ever thinks about these games in a manner that's human and metaphorical and contextual, they'll all become strictly commodities, and then they'll all become boring. They'll *only* be games. And since we've already agreed that video games are the new rock music, it will create a

very depressing scenario: this generation's single most meaningful artistic idiom will still be—ultimately—meaningless.

So, in short: somebody needs to become the first major Xbox critic. Stat. And *you* could feasibly be that person because the field is wide open. If nothing else, I'm sure you'd get rich.

—*Esquire*, 2006

[1](#). This was a mediocre column. I barely remember writing it, and I don't think 98 percent of the Esquire audience read beyond the third paragraph. But to the remaining 2 percent who *did* read this column, it was (apparently) the equivalent of printing excerpts from *The Turner Diaries*. Within the insane world of hard-core gaming, this column was the most incendiary media event since Zelda got laid. I actually had to give an interview with *GameSpot* to address the ensuing "controversy," even though I'm still not sure I fully understand what the controversy was. I get the impression that video game critics took my statements rather personally, arguing that there are lots of good gaming writers and I simply don't know them. But this was actually the very point of the column: my argument is that no gaming critic has emerged as the idiom's definitive voice for the mainstream world (and that such a defining person would be valuable to the art form). The overwhelming response from gamers was that they didn't need (or want) such a critic because they want the insular world of video games to remain insular. What was most interesting (at least to me) was the number of bloggers who responded to my ideas without reading the column itself, openly admitting that they had only perused what other people had already written about it. It was certainly the most vociferous response I've ever received from an article virtually no one read.

[2](#). I wish I wouldn't have referenced Lester Bangs in this instance; *Esquire* ended up headlining this column "The Lester Bangs of Video Games," which is the kind of implication that inevitably drives hipster historians into fits of paroxysm. Whenever someone wants to bemoan the state of pop criticism they immediately try to exhume Bangs's mildly over-rated corpse, and I dislike that tendency as much as everybody else. Unfortunately, Lester Bangs is just about the only rock critic many people have heard of.

Something Instead of Nothing

1 For the first twelve years of my adult life, I sustained a professional existence by asking questions to strangers and writing about what they said.

“Why did you do it?” I would ask these strangers. It did not matter what *it* was. “What were you thinking while you did that? Did it satisfy you? What does it mean to be satisfied? Do you consider yourself to be famous? How does it feel to be famous? How did this experience change you? What elements didn’t change? What will never change? What drives you? Are you lying to me right now? Why should I care about what you are saying? Is this all a construction? Are you constructed? Who constructed you? What was their purpose? Does God exist? Why or why not? Thank you very much. It was great meeting you in the lobby of this unnecessarily expensive hotel.”

This has been a tremendous way to earn a living. Who wouldn’t enjoy getting paid for being curious? Journalism allows almost anyone to direct questions they would never ask of their own friends at random people; since the ensuing dialogue exists for commercial purposes, both parties accept an acceleration of intimacy. People give emotional responses, but those emotions are projections. The result (when things go well) is a dynamic, adversarial, semi-real conversation. I am at ease with this. If given a choice between interviewing someone or talking to them “for real,” I prefer the former; I don’t like having the social limitations of tact imposed upon my day-to-day interactions and I don’t enjoy talking to most people more than once or twice in my lifetime.

2 For the past five years, I’ve spent more time being interviewed than conducting interviews with other people. I am not complaining about this, nor am I proud of it—it’s just the way things worked out, mostly by chance. But the experience has been confusing. Though I always understand why people ask me the same collection of questions, I never know why I answer them. Frankly, I don’t know why anyone answers anything. The obvious explanation is that the interviewee is hoping to promote a product or a

concept (or the “concept of themselves,” which is its own kind of product), but that’s reductive and often untrue; once a media entity makes the decision to conduct and produce an interview with a particular somebody, the piece is going to exist regardless of how the subject responds to the queries. The interviewee can say anything, even if those sentiments contradict reality. They can deliver nothing but clichés, but the story will still run. On three occasions I’ve consciously (and blatantly) attempted to say boring things during an interview in the hope of killing the eventual article. It only worked once. But this type of behavior is rare. Most of the time, I pretend to be interesting. I try to frame my response in the context in which the question was asked, and I try to say things I haven’t said before. But I have no clue as to why I do this (or why anyone else does, either).

During the summer of 2008, I was interviewed by a Norwegian magazine writer named Erik Moller Solheim. He was good at his job. He knew a lot of trivia about Finland’s military history. We ate fried pork knees and drank Ur-Krostitzer beer. But in the middle of our playful conversation, I was suddenly paralyzed by an unspoken riddle I could not answer: Why was I responding to this man’s questions? My books are not translated into Norwegian. If the journalist sent me a copy of his finished article, I could not read a word of it. I don’t even know what the publication’s name (*Dagens Naeringsliv*) is supposed to mean. I will likely never go to Norway, and even if I did, the fact that I was interviewed for this publication would have no impact on my time there. No one would care. The fjords would be underwhelmed.

As such, I considered the possible motives for my actions:

1. I felt I had something important to say. Except I did not. No element of our interaction felt important to me. If anything, I felt unqualified to talk about the things the reporter was asking me. I don’t have that much of an opinion about why certain Black Metal bands burn down churches.
2. It’s my job. Except that it wasn’t. I wasn’t promoting anything. In fact, the interaction could have been detrimental to my career, were I to have inadvertently said something insulting about the king of Norway. Technically, there was more downside than upside.
3. I have an unconscious, unresolved craving for attention. Except that this feels inaccurate. It was probably true twenty years ago, but

those desires have waned. Besides, who gives a fuck about being famous in a country I'll never visit? Why would that feel good to anyone? How would I even know it was happening?

4. I had nothing better to do. This is accurate, but not satisfactory.

5. I'm a nice person. Unlikely.

6. When asked a direct question, it's human nature to respond. This, I suppose, is the most likely explanation. It's the crux of *Frost/Nixon*. But if this is true, why is it true? What is the psychological directive that makes an unanswered question discomfiting?

Why do people talk?

3 Why do people talk? Why do people answer the questions you ask them? Is there a unifying force that prompts people to respond?

Errol Morris¹: Probably not, except possibly that people feel this need to give an account of themselves. And not just to other people, but to themselves. Just yesterday, I was being interviewed by a reporter from the *New York Observer*, and we were talking about whether or not people have privileged access to their own minds.

Privileged access?

EM: My mind resides somewhere inside of myself. That being the case, one would assume I have privileged access to it. In theory, I should be able to ask myself questions and get different answers than I would from other people, such as you. But I'm not sure we truly have privileged access to our own minds. I don't think we have any idea who we are. I think we're engaged in a constant battle to figure out who we are. I sometimes think of interviews as some oddball human relationship that's taking place in a laboratory setting. I often feel like a primatologist.

Do you feel like you know the people that you interview? Because I feel as though I never do. It seems like a totally fake relationship.

EM: I don't feel like I know myself, let alone the people I interview. I might actually know the people I interview *better* than I know myself. A friend of mine once said that you can never trust a person who doesn't talk much,

because how else do you know what they're thinking? Just by the act of being willing to talk about oneself, the person is revealing something about who they are.

But what is the talker's motive? Why did you decide to talk to the *New York Observer*? Why are you talking to me right now?

EM: Well, okay. Let's use the example of Robert McNamara.² Why does McNamara feel the need to talk to me—or to anyone—at this point in his life? Because there's a very strong human desire to do so. It might be to get approval from someone, even if that person is just me. It might even be to get a sense of condemnation from people. Maybe it's just programmed into us as people. McNamara also had this weird “approach-avoidance” thing: He agreed to do the interview because he assumed I was part of the promotion of his [then new] book.³ I called him around the same time his book was coming out, and he thought it was just part of that whole deal. When he realized it was not, he became apprehensive and said he didn't think he was going to do it. But then he did, and it went on for well over a year. In fact, I continued to interview him for a long time after that movie was finished, just because I found it very interesting.

But why did McNamara keep talking?

EM: He said he enjoyed talking to me. That was his explanation.

2A While working for newspapers during the 1990s, I imagined that being interviewed by other reporters would be fun. I assumed answering questions would be easier than asking them. This proved completely untrue. The process of being interviewed is much more stressful than the process of interrogating someone. If you make a mistake while you're interviewing someone else, there is no penalty (beyond the fact that it will be harder to write a complete story). But if you make a mistake while *being* interviewed—if you admit something you'd prefer to keep secret, or if you flippantly answer a legitimately serious question, or if you thoughtlessly disparage a peer you barely know, or if you answer the phone while on drugs—that mistake will inevitably become the focus of whatever is written. As a reporter, you live for those anecdotal mistakes. Mistakes are how you

isolate hidden truths. But as a person, anecdotal mistakes define the experience of being misunderstood; anecdotal mistakes are used to make metaphors that explain the motives of a person who is sort of like you, but not really.

4 “The people who come on *This American Life* have often never heard of our show, or have never even heard of NPR, so they have no idea what the conversation is going to be. It’s very abstract. And we’re on the frontier of doing journalism that’s so personal, no normal journalist would even consider it. That’s part of it. It’s hard to resist whenever someone really wants to listen to you. That’s a very rare thing in most of our lives. I’m a pretty talky person who deals with lots of sensitive people every single day, but if someone really listens to me and cares about what I say for ten minutes in the course of a day—that’s a lot. Some days that doesn’t happen at all.”

[These are the words of Ira Glass, host of *This American Life*, the tent-pole program for most National Public Radio stations. It was later turned into a television show for Showtime. Glass has an immediately recognizable interviewing style: amicable, intellectual, nerdy, and sincere.]

“Sometimes I will be talking to journalism students and they will ask how I get people to open up to me, and the answer is that I’m legitimately curious about what those people are saying. I honestly care about the stories they are telling. That’s a force that talks to the deepest part of us. There is something that happens during therapy when the therapy session is going well: If someone is talking to a therapist about something unresolved—something they don’t understand—and they suddenly start talking about it, it just flows out in this highly narrative, highly detailed form. Most people are not articulate about *everything* in their life, but they are articulate about the things they’re still figuring out.”

[What makes Glass and *TAL* successful is the instantaneously emotive quality of the work—the stories told on the show are typically minor moments in people’s lives, but they hinge on how those seemingly minor moments are transformative. The smallest human details are amplified to demonstrate realizations about what it means to feel profound things. I ask

Glass why his interview subjects trust him, particularly since their stories will inevitably be used on a radio show, mostly for the entertainment of people they'll never meet.]

“They can tell by my questions that I’m really, really interested and really, really thinking about what they’re saying, in a way that only happens in nature when you’re falling in love with someone. When else does that experience happen? If you’re falling in love with someone, you have conversations where you’re truly revealing yourself . . . I think small intimacy that doesn’t extend beyond a single conversation is still intimacy. Even if the basis behind that conversation is purely commercial, there can be moments of real connection with another person. In an interview, we have the apparatus of what generates intimacy—asking someone to bare himself or herself. And if you’re the person being asked the questions, and if you’re normal, it’s hard not to have it work on your heart.”

[Since Glass understands that interviewing is an inherently manipulative process, I ask what motivates him to talk whenever a reporter asks him a question.]

“I really try to do a good job for the interviewer. The first time I was ever interviewed was in the mid-nineties. It was for *Chicago* magazine, about the radio show. I had never been interviewed before. It was a woman reporter, and she was very experienced. But I had never been interviewed before, even though I had conducted and edited thousands of radio interviews over the previous seventeen years. I experienced the entire interview as her: She would ask me a question, and I would listen to myself giving the answer, and I would think, ‘That’s not going to work. That’s not going to work. That’s not the lead.’ I was editing my interview as I produced it. I related more to her than I did to myself. That happened for a long time. But there is a vestige in that. I want to give a good quote. I so often demand a good quote from other people, so I want to do the same for other reporters. I want to be sincere and actually answer the question I’ve been asked, and I want to say it in a way that’s sparkly and interesting. I want to get an A in the class. The whole thing is a projection.”

[I ask Glass how much of his own self-identity is based around being good at interviewing other people. He says, “None at all,” but that it was when he

was younger. He offhandedly mentions that it's difficult to discuss his self-identity. He says his self-image is not very good. I ask him what his self-image is.]

“Well, this kind of takes us outside the realm of what you were originally asking about . . . I'm not sure if I want to talk about this, but . . . [pause] . . . People who really know me, there's probably not a huge gap between my own self-image and their perception. I mean, I don't think of myself as a bad person . . . I don't know how to answer this . . . [very long pause] . . . I'm coming out of a four-year period⁴ where I was so overwhelmed by what I had to do that I don't really feel like *anybody* anymore. I used to completely identify myself through the work I did. It completely absorbed me. But these last four years have been so frantic that I've barely been able to work on things that are my own. A lot of what is on the show is now completely done by other people, and it's great work—but then I have the added weird experience of getting credit for things I haven't done. Since the TV show started and I've really worked two jobs nonstop for four years, I've kind of forgotten what I used to be like. I feel like I'm doing hand-to-hand combat with editing and writing all day long, and I don't even feel *anything* about it. This is a huge problem, and I'm trying to deal with it.”

[I ask him if the expansion of *This American Life* to television—and the growth of the *TAL* brand in the mainstream culture—has made him a less happy person.]

“Yes.”

[I ask if he likes the idea of that information eventually appearing in a book. I ask if the public recognition of this realization will make him feel better.]

“No, I won't feel better about it. I'll feel bad about it. But I'm trying to do right by the person who's interviewing me.”

4A I don't agree with Ira Glass. I used to, but I don't anymore. He makes a valid point, and I certainly understand why he would argue that it's hypocritical for a journalist to decline answering another reporter's question; the degree of empathy Glass feels toward rival interviewers

indicates that he's a giving person. But I never feel this way. I don't feel it's my obligation to respond to anything, and as a reporter, I never felt anyone else owed me a response. And yet I still provide answers to every question I encounter, even if I don't know what I should say.

Sometimes I openly lie.

This morning, I was interviewed by a reporter from a magazine based in New York. He was asking me about a novel I'd written, specifically about one passage where a character says something negative about human nature. The reporter said to me, "This character sounds exactly like you speaking. That specific sentiment sounds like something you would say." And he was correct. In this specific instance, the interior thoughts of the character were an exact reflection of my personal thoughts about the world at large. The reporter was totally right. But I refuted his suggestion. "No, that's not true," I said. "I don't feel that way at all."

Now, why did I do this?

When I wrote those words on my computer, my goal was for every reader to come to the same conclusion that this reporter did. My intention was that people would read this sentence and instantly recognize that the character was a proxy for my own worldview and that this narrative device would allow me to directly write about the way I felt. But I didn't want to admit that. I didn't want to say, "Yes, this is how I feel." I just wanted people to *suspect* that this was true. So when I was asked if this sentence represented who I was, I said no. In other words, I gave an answer that completely undercut my own artistic intentions—and if asked this same question again, I would repeat the behavior. I feel no compulsion to do right by the people who interview me. In fact, I sometimes want to do wrong, even if the only person who suffers is myself.

3A How skeptical are you about the things people tell you during interviews?

Errol Morris: I'm skeptical about *everything* I hear. I *am* in the business of deciding what is or isn't true, and in figuring out which accounts are accurate and which are inaccurate, but I'm also in the business of creating a story, and that is something different. When I did *The Thin Blue Line*,⁵ there were all these separate first-person interviews that I eventually stitched together into one story line. I found all these so-called eyewitnesses who

had testified at the trial, and I interviewed them one by one by one. I was principally interested in two questions. The first was: How reliable was their testimony in this capital murder case? The second was: Who in the hell is this person that I am talking to? If you have this presumption that every person sees the world in a different way, how do you capture that? What you're trying to do with any interview is to capture the way a person sees the world.

What's more interesting to you: someone who lies consciously, someone who lies unconsciously, or someone who tells a relatively mundane version of the truth?

EM: Conscious mendacity! Actually, that's a very difficult question. The whole idea of lying as it applies to personhood is an important problem. I'll give you an example: I read a piece about modern forms of lie detection—methods that go beyond the polygraph. The writer's idea was that we can actually record activity inside the brain that proves who is or who isn't lying. It suggests that the brain is some kind of 'reality recorder' and that we *know* when we are lying. But I think those kinds of lies represent a very small piece of the pie. I think the larger sect of liars are people who think they are telling the truth, but who really have no idea what the truth is. So the deeper question is, what's more important: narrative consistency or truth? I think we're always trying to create a consistent narrative for ourselves. I think truth always takes a backseat to narrative. Truth has to sit at the back of the bus.

That's interesting, but I disagree. I think truth tends to usurp narrative every single time. If it turned out that even one person in your nonfiction film *Vernon, Florida* had been a hired actor, your entire career would be called into question. Or look at someone like James Frey⁶: Here was a guy who wrote a book that everyone seemed to appreciate as a narrative construction—but the moment they realized it was fake, his talent as a stylist no longer mattered. The perception of its value was dependent on the veracity of the story.

EM: When you talk about a James Frey-type of situation, you're talking about a person who has been outed. That was more like, "We caught you! We caught you! And we as a society are going to make you pay for

deceiving us!” But that’s an egregious example. Most lying is just an accepted part of the world . . . if you don’t want to know something, can you not know it? Can you convince yourself that you *don’t* know it? Can you actually *not* know it, in some real sense? Can you form a barrier to knowing things?

Probably. But doesn’t that change when a conversation becomes “an interview”? Does the import of the truth change when the situation is specifically designed for the purposes of truth finding?

EM: That’s a crazy idea. Why does an interview change anything? Have I sworn to tell the truth? Have I put my hand on a Bible?

No, but the difference is distribution. If you were to make a film about me, I’m not just talking to you. I’m talking to a public audience.

EM: But what if you have no idea what the truth is? What if you’re convinced that your lies are what really happened?

I wouldn’t classify that as lying. I’d classify that as being wrong.

EM: I’m a great believer in self-deception. If you asked me what makes the world go round, I would say self-deception. Self-deception allows us to create a consistent narrative for ourselves that we actually believe. I’m not saying that the truth doesn’t matter. It does. But self-deception is how we survive. I remember this crazy-ass journalist from Dallas who once interviewed me, and he asked if I Mirandized my documentary subjects before putting them on film. I was like, “What?” I should read my interview subjects their Miranda rights because their words might be used in the court of public opinion?

Well, that *is* crazy. But tell me this—have you ever been in a situation where you were interviewing someone, and you knew the subject did not understand the consequences of what they were saying?

EM: All the time!

Is there an ethical problem with that?

EM: Is there an ethical problem with the possibility of people not knowing what they're saying? Or with *why* they're saying it?

No, a problem in the sense that a subject might not realize that this interview is going to galvanize how she's perceived. Or a problem in the sense that someone might be talking to you without realizing the consequence of what he's saying.

EM: Well, it's possible you're assigning too much importance to yourself. [sarcastically] "Do these people not realize that this interview is going to *transform* how they are seen by others? Do they not realize it will *transform* how they see themselves?" If people were entirely reasonable, they would avoid all interviews, all the time. But they don't.

And why don't they?

EM: Because perhaps something interesting will transpire. They think, "Maybe this person will present me in a way that will be interesting. Maybe this person will present me in a way that I would like to be seen."

4B During most of the 1980s and much of the '90s, Prince declined almost every interview request he received. On those rare occasions he granted an interview, he always made a curious demand: The reporter could not use a tape recorder or take written notes. The reporter just had to memorize whatever Prince happened to be saying that day. At the time, it was assumed that Prince did this because he was beavershit crazy and always wanted to be in a position to retract whatever was written about him. However, his real motive was more reasonable and (kind of) brilliant: He wanted to force the reporter to reflect only the *sense* of the conversation, as opposed to the specific phrases he elected to use. He was not concerned about being misquoted; he was concerned about being quoted accurately. Prince believed that he could represent himself better as an abstraction—his words could not be taken out of context *if there was no context*. He could only be presented as the sum total of whatever was said, devoid of specifics.

Do I grant interviews because I want to be presented in a way that will be interesting? Maybe. Except that the things that would be most interesting to other people might be potentially humiliating to me. Do I want to be

presented in a way that I would like to be seen? Of course, but “the way I would like to be seen” would almost certainly be an inaccurate, delusional depiction of who I actually am. It strikes me that the two objectives mentioned by Morris are inherently contradictory: Presenting a subject in an interesting way inevitably means said subject is unable to control how that perception will be received.⁷ The interviewee is not able to compose the way they want to be seen. Here again, it becomes easy to see the media savvy of Prince. By making it impossible to quote him directly, he was able to satisfy both of Morris’s contradictory desires—he would always come across as interesting (in that the reporter would be forced to essentially fictionalize a narrative from a conversation that was almost impossible to reference), but he’d still be presented in the way he wanted to be seen (which is to say, enigmatically).

It was a good idea.

5 “If a question is interesting, it is very difficult to resist answering it, because you will usually find your own answer interesting to yourself. If you have any ego at all, or a desire to share your experience and thought processes, then you may also imagine your answer will be of interest to other people.” This is Chris Heath talking (or, more accurately, this is Chris Heath writing—I posed my questions to him via e-mail). Heath⁸ has done hundreds of deep celebrity profiles for *GQ* and *Rolling Stone*, first emerging as a journalistic superstar during that brief, bizarre stretch of the middle nineties when *Details* was the most interesting magazine in America. “But that lure and appeal would quickly break down in a real conversation without a second factor: the person asking the question must be interested in hearing the answer. There’s no single bigger reason why people answer questions. Here, of course, lies the biggest difference between a successful interviewer and an unsuccessful one: the successful one makes the interviewee feel as though he or she is interested in the answers. The unsuccessful interviewer—and I have sat in or listened to enough interviews to know, unfortunately, and disappointingly, how common they are—does not.”

Taken at face value, Heath’s analysis is obvious, undeniable, and Glass-like—it’s hard to resist talking to someone who cares about what you are saying. It’s a seductive experience, even if you’re simply sitting next to someone at a dinner party who happens to be an especially intriguing bozo.

But there's a difference between being listened to by a stranger at a party and being listened to by Chris Heath, and everyone understands what that difference is: No matter how captivating Heath may seem, the conversation is happening for a practical, nonpersonal purpose. The banter may be pleasurable, but you're not bantering for pleasure.

Unless, of course, giving interviews to reporters is the closest you ever come to the kind of day-to-day dialogue normal people have all the time—and that's often the case for the superfamous. One of the underappreciated complexities to success is that it makes every interpersonal conversation unbalanced; I assume the only people Jennifer Aniston can comfortably talk with about her career problems are Courteney Cox and Lisa Kudrow (to anyone else, her problems would seem like bragging). In all likelihood, interviews are the only situations when a woman like Aniston can openly talk about the central issues occupying her mind.

"I detect that there's a prevalent notion in the media that it's next to impossible to interestingly interview a celebrity, because they do so many interviews that they're drained and leached dry of any interest or motivation," writes Heath. "I have a feeling that the opposite is more often true. Celebrities do so many short, pointless, bad interviews—weeks of talking in which it must be impossible to maintain the delusion that one is being understood or accurately depicted in any way—that when they find themselves in a conversation in which, maybe subconsciously, they feel the possibility of being somewhat understood, and that the reality of their life will be somewhat realistically portrayed, the interview may begin to feel less like wasted time and more like an antidote to all that other wasted time. And so when asked a good question, they'll answer."

But how does this apply to normal people? How does this affect people who didn't marry Brad Pitt or popularize a type of haircut?

"It's an uncomfortable leap, but this question led me to consider how different (or similar) that motivation is to people's desire to appear on *Jerry Springer*-type shows or in various reality TV situations," Heath continued. "We are used to the idea of giving witness to one's life as an important and noble counterpoint to being unheard, especially when applied to people in certain disadvantaged, oppressed or unacceptable situations. But in a slightly more pathological way, I'm not sure that we aren't seeing the emergence of a society in which almost *everyone* who isn't famous considers themselves cruelly and unfairly unheard. As though being

famous, and the subject of wide attention, is considered to be a fulfilled human being's natural state—and so, as a corollary, the cruelly unheard millions are perpetually primed and fired up to answer any and all questions in order to redress this awful imbalance.”

There's a lot of truth in that last bit. I fear that most contemporary people are answering questions not because they're flattered by the attention; they're answering questions because they feel as though they *deserve* to be asked. About everything. Their opinions are special, so they are entitled to a public forum. Their voice is supposed to be heard, lest their life become empty.

This, in one paragraph (minus technology), explains the rise of New Media.

4C Because this essay will appear in a book that I will have to promote through the media, reporters who interview me will ask questions about this essay. They will ask if I have come to understand why I (or anyone else) answer interview questions. I will initially say, “No.” But I will still guess at the explanation, and my verbalized guess will go something like this: People answer questions because it feels stranger to do the opposite. And the next time I interview someone, I will try to remember this.

3B How different were your conversations with Robert McNamara when you weren't filming him? Is he a different person when he's not on camera? Are *you* a different person when you're not interviewing or being interviewed?

Errol Morris: That's a whole set of questions. One of the things that really interests me is that filming people for a movie has become very crazy. I usually have a crew of thirty people in the studio. That created a big question during the making of *The Thin Blue Line*—can you really investigate something with a camera? Are you able to hear something you would normally miss in a normal conversation? Are people going to disclose something to a camera with a bunch of strangers in the room? The self-serving answer for someone in my position is, of course, “Yes.” I think that you can. I think something strange happens when you put a person in a formal interview setting and they realize they are expected to talk. *They do*

talk. But why do people submit themselves to this? That's more complex. It's crazy. I mean, why am I talking to you right now?

That's precisely what I'm trying to figure out. With someone like McNamara, I can imagine a motive—he's a historic figure, and his identity is built around his life's work and the consequence of that work. But what about those people you interviewed in that *First Person* series for the Independent Film Channel? Those were nonfamous private citizens. Publicity got them nothing. There was a person you interviewed in an episode of *First Person*—Rick Rosner⁹—whose personal story was that he purposely repeated his senior year in high school several times and then lost on the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. For him, what is the value of being interviewed?

EM: Well, Rick Rosner now tells other people that if they want to understand him, they should watch that one-hour program about his life that I made.

Why do you think he feels that way?

EM: I can't speak for Rick Rosner, but I can kind of imagine why he would like it. I imagine that he is a pretty complicated character who doesn't understand himself that well. He's in the grip of all this *stuff* that he cannot control. So the interview allows him to scrutinize himself in a different way. There are two ways to look at this. There are two different models. The first model is that we all have this black box inside ourselves that is filled with our secrets, and we would never want to allow any interviewer to open that box. But the second model is that even we don't know what's inside that black box, and being interviewed allows us to open it and sort through the contents.

Do you enjoy being interviewed?

EM: I don't mind talking. I think talking has been very important to me. For a long time I had writer's block and all I could do was talk. Then I was able to make movies that involved other people talking. Recently I've started writing, and that's changed things. For a long time, I thought my constant talking was an impediment to my writing, but now I don't know if that was

true or not. I'm envious of writers, because a writer leaves this trail of detritus. As a writer, you have this trail of writing that is an account of yourself and who you are. For years, I was deprived of that opportunity, because I couldn't write. So the talking was essential. It was a way to do something instead of nothing.

6 More than a year after meeting in Boston, Errol Morris was gracious enough to record his bits of dialogue from this essay for the book's eventual audio version. Much to my surprise, he took issue with one of his own sentences from our interview.

At the beginning of section 3A, there's a line that now reads, "I *am* in the business of deciding what is or isn't true." This is not how the sentence read in the original transcript, nor is it what I vividly remember from our conversation. What Morris originally said was, "I'm *not* in the business of deciding what is or isn't true." However, this is not what he meant to say, nor is it a sentiment he wanted to imply. As such, I immediately changed it (I would be a bad interviewer if I consciously published a statement the subject did not agree with, regardless of whether or not that statement had been inadvertently expressed). But this dispute accidentally proves the point I've been making all along: It's hard to fathom why people allow themselves to be interviewed. Even when you're simply transcribing a person's direct dialogue, you will rarely capture how they actually feel.

Here's what (I think) happened: When Morris originally said "I'm not in the business of deciding what is or isn't true," he was essentially saying, "I am not a cop. I'm not part of the executive branch of government. My job is to make a nonfiction movie, not to define anyone's guilt or innocence." Now, there's absolutely nothing wrong with that objective. But when Morris reread those literal words on the page, they felt totally alien to him; they seemed to suggest he didn't even care what the truth was. "Why would I spend three years trying to right a miscarriage of justice and solve a murder case in Texas, if I was truly indifferent to the business of deciding what is or isn't true," Morris later wrote me in an e-mail. "And why would I ask the question about the reliability of the testimony of various witnesses if I didn't care about truth?" I completely understand his perspective. I've had the same thing happen to me. It does not matter how diligent or well-intentioned the reporter is—the inherent distortion of the process inevitably overrides accuracy.

So what does this tell us? Should we just journalistically surrender? Should we stop answering questions *and* stop asking them altogether? Of course not. There is no alternative. The defective practice of trying to understand the world by asking other people how they see it is still the best means we have for establishing a reality we can all agree to be real. We have to do it, because it's better than nothing. It is, in fact, something. But that's *all* it is: Something. Instead of nothing.

1. Errol Morris is the most recognized American documentary filmmaker of the modern era and arguably the finest American nonfiction director of all time. His movies include *Gates of Heaven*, *The Thin Blue Line*, *The Fog of War*, and *Standard Operating Procedure*. For two years, he had a TV series called *First Person* that was composed of intense one-on-one interviews with random, unfamous weirdos. What makes Morris such a brilliant artist is the simplicity of his technique: He simply asks people questions, films their response, and then finds (or creates) stock footage that accentuates the import and context of what his subject is saying. He does this through the use of the “interrotron,” a self-designed camera that allows the interview subject to see a live image of Morris’s face in the eye of the recording camera.

[2](#). McNamara was the controversial U.S. secretary of defense during the Vietnam War and president of the World Bank from 1968 to 1981. He was the subject of Morris's Academy Award-winning 2003 film *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*.

3. *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing, and Catastrophe in the Twenty-first Century.*

4. This interview was conducted on August 6, 2008.

5. This is a documentary about the 1976 murder of a policeman.

6. Frey is the disgraced author of *A Million Little Pieces*, a bestselling nonfiction book that purported to be about the author's drug and alcohol addictions, his life of crime and depravity, and how he overcame these vices with his own sheer willpower. The book proved to be partially—and perhaps mostly—untrue. In fact, Frey initially attempted to sell the book as a novel, only (it seems) to realize it was more commercially viable if he claimed all the events had happened to him in real life.

7. A textbook example is blues guitarist John Mayer's 2010 interview with Rob Tannenbaum in *Playboy*. Mayer was totally unguarded in the conversation, speaking candidly about race, pornography, and the complexity of his own romantic life. One of the central elements of the dialogue was Mayer's surprising popularity within the black community. However, because Mayer verbally acknowledged a racial epithet and mentioned that he was not physically attracted to black women (despite citing several black women he *did* find attractive), he was immediately crucified by public opinion. As Tannenbaum himself tweeted the day after the piece was published on the Internet, "The Web is a series of filters. Each filter narrowed the story more & more, until, in some sectors, it turned into, *John Mayer is a racist.*" Mayer was eventually forced to apologize for being honest and interesting. It has been said that pretty much everything about John Mayer is fascinating, except for his music.

[8](#). A British writer, Heath started at the UK magazine *Smash Hits* and has also written two books on the Pet Shop Boys and a third on Robbie Williams.

9. Rosner is believed to have one of the highest IQ scores ever measured. Through an elaborate system of disguises and false identification, he inexplicably repeated twelfth grade four times. After losing on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, he attempted to sue the program over the phrasing of the \$16,000 question he got wrong. He has also worked as a male stripper and twice subsisted on dog food. Years later, he would appear in a commercial for Domino's Pizza.

It Will Shock You How Much It Never Happened

1 There are new cans of Pepsi in the grocery store, and the cans look different. They're a deeper shade of blue, except for a few that are gold. The font is faux futuristic. These new aluminum cans look better, I suppose, although I know the old design will seem superior as soon as the new ones stop looking novel—it's the same process that happens whenever a sports franchise changes uniforms.

I don't drink Pepsi unless I'm flying on Northwest Airlines and they're out of Mountain Dew. Pepsi disappoints me. It makes me thirstier. But perhaps I'm wrong about this; perhaps I'm wrong about how I think and taste and feel. Perhaps I'm just not optimistic enough. Maybe if I had more confidence in the future of America, I would want to drink more Pepsi. Maybe if I believed Pepsi understood my lifestyle better, it would refresh me more.

Somebody working for Pepsi likes *Mad Men* too much.

2 The collection of words printed below this paragraph is from a press release. I'm not sure if I can legally reprint a Pepsi-Cola press release without their permission, but logic would suggest that I can. For one thing, this essay is (technically) media criticism, so copyright rules are tilted in my favor. More to the point, *this is a press release*, which means it only exists so that other people can republish whatever it pretends to argue. All things considered, having their propaganda available inside a library has to be a publicist's greatest fantasy. The press release is unnecessarily detailed, so I have placed the most interesting, least reasonable elements in boldface.

Purchase, N.Y., December 10, 2008—Despite a failing economy, employment woes and countless other concerns, a key segment of Millennials—people who were born between 1980 and 1990—remain confident about what 2009 will have in store for them. According to an omnibus survey conducted by StrategyOne® on behalf of Pepsi, four out of five Millennials are hopeful about the future as the New Year

approaches, and nearly all surveyed (95%) agree that it is important for them to maintain a positive outlook on life.

More than 2,000 Americans were surveyed as part of the Pepsi Optimism Project (POP), a new and ongoing study examining the mindset of Millennials. The survey comes as Pepsi launches a branding initiative that is part of a significant, multiyear reinvestment in carbonated soft drinks. The campaign starts with a new look for the trademark Pepsi packaging, which is now beginning to appear on store shelves across the country. An advertising campaign featuring a consistent theme of optimism that mirrors the current social climate will debut shortly.

“Pepsi has always stood for youthful exuberance and optimism and we’re pleased to learn through this survey that the positive spirit in youth culture is not only intact but growing,” said Dave Burwick, Pepsi’s chief marketing officer. “Our new brand identity campaign reflects that optimism like never before—on shelf and in advertising.”

“Children of the ’80s and ’90s inherently feel a strong sense of optimism in the future and their ability to shape it,” says Lisa Orrell, generation relations expert and author of *Millennials Incorporated*. “This age group feels refreshingly unencumbered by history or tradition, a feeling that they can accomplish anything they resolve to achieve.”

According to the POP survey, Millennials spend more time enjoying life than worrying about it and this group is most optimistic about their overall well-being and relationships with friends and family. Other findings include:

- With the season of good will upon us, 74% find that supporting causes makes them feel more optimistic.
- Despite recent job forecasts, 77% of Millennials report having a strong sense of optimism about their careers.

- Nearly all Millennials (95%) make positive associations when they think of the word “change,” associating it with “progress” (78%), “hope” (77%) and “excitement” (72%).
- Two-thirds of Millennials (67%) say that the election of Barack Obama is making them feel optimistic about the future of the country.

Fueled by an excitement for change and an eagerness to shape their own destinies, Millennials are gearing up to make 2009 their year. Orrell concludes, “With so much to worry about over the next several months, maybe we would all be better served taking on this group’s optimism.”

It is not my intention to mock Pepsi for taking this approach to selling soda, particularly since (a) it’s too easy to make fun of press releases, and (b) there’s at least a 50 percent chance that this strategy is stupid enough to succeed. Labeling those born between 1980 and 1990 as “Millennials” might be a less-than-brilliant move (it kind of makes young people sound like garden shrubs), but weirder tags have stuck in the past. It’s amusing to see someone named Lisa branding herself with the fictional title of “generation relations expert,” not to mention how Lisa’s paradoxically positive belief about Pepsi’s target age group feeling “refreshingly unencumbered by history” indicates that Pepsi views its consumer base as a demographic of reanimated corpses who’ve consumed their own brain blood. But whether this “Refresh everything” scheme succeeds is almost beside the point; it really isn’t that different from Coca-Cola’s competing campaign, “Open happiness” (an attempt to connect drinking Coke with spiritual contentment). What I’m more intrigued by is the thought process behind Pepsi’s decision. It appears to be something akin to this:

1. We want people to buy Pepsi. Unfortunately . . .
2. The country is struggling (and perhaps even collapsing). However . . .
3. Whatever beverage consumers are drinking does not really reflect anything important about society. Therefore . . .
4. If people need to be wrong about something, it’s okay for them to be wrong about how they feel toward Pepsi. So . . .

5. Let's associate Pepsi with the exact opposite of everything happening in America, based on the premise that . . .
6. Young Americans would always prefer to be wrong and optimistic (as opposed to pragmatic and sad).

This is a brilliant application of profound cynicism—it actively tries to use people's misplaced optimism against them. It understands both how the media operates and how consumers are predisposed to distrust whatever messages they hear. It's the epitome of "high concept," which is another way of saying the strategy's genius is directly tied to the fact that it doesn't make sense unless you think about it in totally abstract, completely intangible terms. The fundamental premise essentially boils down to Al Pacino's explanation for drinking alcohol on a hot day in *Glengarry Glen Ross*: "I subscribe to the law of contrary public opinion. If everyone thinks one thing, then I say bet the opposite." It's that omnipresent notion that there's some deeper truth in business that's intentionally counterintuitive—you're never selling what you're actually selling. You sell people Pepsi by selling them Obama. That's the trick, and everyone knows it.

So what happens when everyone knows the trick? Does it still work?

It does. In fact, it works better.

3 As a piece of entertainment, *Mad Men* has done everything right. It's perfectly cast and brilliantly paced, and it uses symmetrical symbolism in a way rarely attempted on television—every plot point is mirrored by a minor, less overt story line in the same allegorical vein. No character is drawn without flaws. By placing itself in the "secret" 1960s that everyone now accepts as normative (i.e., the subversive and the damaged masquerading as suburban bliss), its white-collar characters are able to get away with living archaic, un-PC lives that (a) feel completely authentic but (b) would be impossible to depict in the present. Certainly, my opinion of *Mad Men* is not unique; with the possible exception of *The Wire*, I can't think of any contemporary TV show that's been more acclaimed by affluent audiences. And part of what we upwardly mobile, media-obsessed goofballs adore is the program's perverse glorification of the ad man. It makes advertising seem like the greatest career imaginable. Watching *Mad Men* makes me want to trick housewives into buying Tide.

Mad Men's protagonist is Don Draper, a pathological liar who charms women by grabbing their vaginas in crowded restaurants. He's not a good person, but he's kilometers beyond cobalt cool—and he's cool for unusual reasons. He's cool for being extraordinary at an office job. He's cool for keeping secrets and chain-smoking and cheating on his wife. He's cool for the way he talks to strangers. What follows is his extemporaneous description of how he intends to sell the Kodak Carousel (a circular slide projector for home movies) to the American public:

Nostalgia . . . it's delicate, but potent . . . in Greek, nostalgia literally means the pain from an old wound. It's a twinge in your heart, far more powerful than memory alone. This device—it isn't a spaceship. It's a time machine. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called The Wheel. It's called The Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels: around and around and back home again, to a place we know we are loved.

Within the environment of the episode, Draper is (obviously) not talking about projectors. He's talking about his own life and his own insecurities, and he's thinking about how his success as an idea salesman is irrevocably connected to his failures as a normal person. But try to think about that passage in nonmetaphorical terms; think about what those words would mean in a nonfictional, plotless workplace. Draper's espoused strategy is to confuse people; he's trying to make consumers associate a feeling (nostalgia) with a product (The Carousel) by artfully implying that the product *generates* that feeling. This is—I suppose—unethical. But not enough to hurt anyone: The net result of Draper's deception is that someone might purchase a slide projector they don't necessarily need. His motives are impure but not sinister. We all take for granted that this is how advertising works. And because this moment in *Mad Men* happens in 1960 (and because we're seeing this moment in 2007), the idea of intertwining emotion and commerce is entertaining: We assume this kind of advertising scheme would completely snow every target market from that era. Because it's happening in 1960, what Draper is proposing intrigues us because it seems *new*. It's like we're watching the invention of media duplicity. But now, duplicitous advertising is all that there is; it's what we expect from advertising all the time. The emotional transference Draper appears to be

inventing is what we naturally anticipate from the promotion of any product. And that should make it fail. But it doesn't. And I think that's because people *like* recognizing that they are a target market. It makes them feel smart for figuring it out, and it makes them feel good to be viewed as desirable. And I suspect that advertisers are aware of this. Selling emotion is no longer a scheme: Pepsi-Cola can just send out a press release openly stating that Pepsi is now designed for optimistic young people, and optimistic young people make fun of that concept's lack of subtlety. But even as they mock, they think, "That's kind of interesting. That's kind of flattering. Is that who they think I am? I wonder how they came up with that?" Perhaps they imagine Don Draper in a room full of cigarette smoke, holding up a blue Pepsi can that looks like it was made in Tokyo.

Optimism . . . it's difficult but potent . . . on the Internet, optimism literally means the only answer to an unclear world. It's an explosion in your heart, far more powerful than common sense alone. This beverage—it isn't a refreshing treat. It's a hope machine. It embodies a taste we ache to experience later. It's not called Soda. It's called Pop. It lets us feel the way a child feels: out and away from reality, in a place we know we are loved.

People love advertising. They say they don't, but they do. And I don't just mean that they like clever commercials or reading *Lucky*; I mean they like the idea of a Draper (a) whom they'll never meet who (b) understands what they want and (c) views that wanting as important. It does not matter that this definition of import doesn't extend beyond their ability to pay for things. A feeling is a feeling is a feeling.

4 PepsiCo Incorporated has interesting problems. Around the same time they were making Pepsi less cynical, PepsiCo made a packaging change to another of their products, Tropicana Pure Premium orange juice. For whatever reason, PepsiCo changed the orange juice carton: Instead of an orange with a protruding straw, they featured the more literal image of a glass of orange juice. Immediately, orange juice drinkers lost their shit (not all of them, but enough to get attention). They were outraged; they could not believe that Tropicana had altered this essential image of an imaginary orange you could suck. A few weeks later, Tropicana switched back to the

original design. This reversal was covered in the February 22, 2009, edition of *The New York Times*, and the angle of the story was that PepsiCo was dealing with its own version of Coca-Cola's infamous 1985 introduction of New Coke.¹ However, there was at least one major difference that was mentioned in the story parenthetically, almost as an aside . . .

(There are, it should be noted, significant differences between the two corporate flip-flops. For instance, the Tropicana changes involved only packaging, not the formula for or taste of the beverage.)

The orange juice was the same. As far as I can tell, the size and shape of the container itself was also identical—the only alteration was the picture on the carton. People were appalled because the same product (at the same price) was being presented to them in a slightly different way. If you're a person involved in the profession of advertising, this kind of scenario is the apotheosis of your vocation. It illustrates a rarified level of consumer appreciation: People aren't just buying something *because* of the advertising—they feel like they are *buying the advertising itself*. An essential piece of what they desire is the image on the carton, even though that image is only there to get attention and inform you of what's inside. It has nothing to do with juice. It almost never does.

This happens all the time: LeBron James does not sell Nikes; buying Nikes allows people to buy "LeBron James" (and whatever that's supposed to mean outside of itself). That cliché has been understood by advertisers for generations, or at least since Michael Jordan killed off Converse in the eighties. But—right now, today—*everyone* knows that this is how the game works. So how can a trick work when everyone knows it's a trick?

Because the trick is the product.

On *Mad Men*, Draper tries to create a soft reality—he tries to trick housewives into thinking that Heineken beer reflects something about their level of class that Budweiser does not. Draper knows that this transference is a construction, but he knows how emotive construction works. As the audience for *Mad Men*, we intellectually relate to his task. We're sophisticated enough to imagine how beer can be sold as a lifestyle. And this is because the central mission of advertising has succeeded completely. What used to be its seemingly preposterous scheme—selling an emotion or a worldview through a disparate product—is now the actual, accepted

motive behind why people buy things. It's the hard reality. There was a time when the only person who'd be crazy enough to argue that the visual image of an orange with a straw sticking from its side was "meaningful" was the artist who drew it; now everyone assumes this *must* be the case. It *must* have meaning. It's expected. So the advertiser's question is not "What do we tell people this product is supposed to mean?" The question is "When we tell people what this product is supposed to mean, how much will they accept and appreciate our transparently bullshit message?" In other words, Pepsi is not really trying to market soda pop to optimistic people. That's impossible and nonsensical. What they're hoping is that when consumers recognize that Pepsi is trying to amorphaously tie soda to optimism, a segment of that audience will decide, "That's a good idea. It's ridiculous, but I see what they're doing. I'm willing to associate myself with this gimmick." It's the difference between a magician performing a trick to impress his audience and a magician trying to sell that trick to other magicians. There's nobody left for advertisers to fool. *We're all magicians.*

3A In the late nineties, a copywriter named Luke Sullivan published a book about advertising regrettably titled *Hey, Whipple, Squeeze This*. Part of the story was about how much Sullivan hated those "Don't squeeze the Charmin" commercials from the 1960s and '70s, regardless of how much toilet paper they moved along the way. To validate his point, he quoted a man named Norman Berry, an old-timey creative director for Ogilvy and Mather (the New York advertising agency that would eventually handle Kodak, just like Draper's fictional employer, Sterling Cooper).

I'm appalled by those who [judge] advertisers exclusively on the basis of sales. That isn't enough . . . if sales are achieved with work which is in bad taste or is intellectual garbage, it shouldn't be applauded no matter how much it sells. Offensive, dull, abrasive, stupid advertising is bad for business as a whole. It is why the public perception of advertising is going down in this country.

Berry's point seems high minded and superficially levelheaded: He's arguing that the value of advertising isn't directly tied to its economic success. He thinks it should be socially uplifting and entertaining, and it should engage its audience. Berry's sentiments, it would seem, have now

become the modern “perception of advertising,” which is clearly *not* going down in this country. It’s going up. When Americans watch Super Bowl commercials, they analyze them as pieces of art; they think about the message the images imply and they blog about what those implications are supposed to prove about the nation as a whole. We assume that commercials are not just informing us about purchasable products, because that would be crude and ineffective. We’re smarter than that. But that understanding makes us more vulnerable. We’ve become the ideal audience for advertising—consumers who intellectually magnify commercials in order to make them more trenchant and clever than they actually are. Our fluency with the language and motives of the advertiser induces us to create new, better meanings for whatever they show us. We do most of the work for them.

Like all people who pretend they’re smart, I want to feel immune to this. I avoid advertising. Since the advent of digital video recorders, I rarely watch² TV commercials (even when they come on during live sporting events I immediately change the channel, usually to a different live sporting event). I wrote a column in *Esquire* for five years, yet I can’t think of one company who advertised alongside my work (I know they were there, but I can’t remember any of them). I’ve never read a pop-up or a banner ad on the web. Does anyone? Even if I watch *Survivor* at cbs.com, I check my e-mail during the uncloseable commercial that precedes the episode. Obviously, I’m not the only person who does this. Yet—somehow—I still know about new things that are available to purchase. I can sense when I’m a target market. I knew that Pepsi was focusing on optimism long before I saw any new logos or press releases. So how could this be? How is it that ideas I never think about still burrow into my head? Why do I understand an ad campaign I completely avoid?

I enjoy Don Draper. He’s got a lot of quality suits. But I’m afraid I might be his employer, and I don’t even know it.

[1](#). The failure of which, it should be noted, helped Coca-Cola immensely. The introduction of New Coke was either the smartest or luckiest marketing scheme of the 1980s.

2. When I first wrote this sentence, it read, “Since the advent of digital video recorders, I never see TV commercials.” But I suppose that isn’t accurate; I don’t *watch* commercials, but I do *see* them. I see them flicker across the screen at four times the normal speed, minus the audio. And maybe this is enough. Maybe all I need to do is see them, because I can figure out the rest on my own.

FAIL

1 There are certain rules I try to follow as a writer. One rule is to never place the word *and* directly following a semicolon. Another is not to write positively about diabolical mathematicians who murder people through the U.S. mail. As a consequence, I'm nervous about saying anything non-negative (or even neutral) about Ted Kaczynski, simply because there are always certain readers who manage to get the wrong idea about everything. For most of the world, the fact that Kaczynski killed three people and injured twenty-three others negates everything else about him. There is only one socially acceptable way to view the Unabomber: as a hairy, lumber-obsessed extremist whose icy brilliance was usurped only by a sinister lack of empathy. Writing about Kaczynski's merits as a philosopher is kind of like writing about O. J. Simpson's merits as a running back—at first it confuses people, and then it makes them mad. I would advise against it. You absolutely cannot win.

But who wants to win?

Like so many modern people, my relationship with technology makes no sense whatsoever: It's the most important aspect of my life that I hate. The more central it becomes to how I live, the worse it seems for the world at large. I believe all technology has a positive short-term effect and a negative long-term impact, and—on balance—the exponential upsurge of technology's social import has been detrimental to the human experience. Obviously and paradoxically, I'm writing these sentiments on a laptop computer. And because I've felt this way for years (and because I've e-mailed these same thoughts to other people), there are those who tell me I'm like Ted Kaczynski.¹ The only thing everyone knows about Kaczynski (apart from the violence) is that he was an enraged hermitic technophobe who lived in the woods. His basic narrative has been established: He left academia for rural Montana, he spent seventeen years sending anonymous letter bombs to innocent people he'd never met, he demanded that his thirty-five-thousand-word manifesto be published in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and he was apprehended in 1996 after his brother and the FBI deduced that Kaczynski was the Unabomber. All of that is true.

This is why the Unabomber matters to historians: He's a fascinating, unique crime story. But the problem with that criminal fascination is how it's essentially erased the content of his motives. Kaczynski believed he had to kill people in order to get his ideas into the public discourse. He was totally upfront about this: "If [I] had never done anything violent and had submitted the present writings to a publisher, they probably would not have been accepted," he plainly writes in *Industrial Society and Its Future*. "In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people." On the most primitive level, this goal succeeded. But not the way he hoped. Because Kaczynski sent bombs to people, nobody takes anything he says seriously (they might in three hundred years, but they don't right now). Despite the huge circulations of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and its ever-present availability on the Internet, the "Unabomber Manifesto" is an unread, noninfluential document. And that's regrettable, because every day, the content of *Industrial Society and Its Future* becomes more and more interesting. It's like an artless, bookish version of the Kinks song "20th Century Man," amplified by a madman who's too smart to be reasonable. I will grant that it contains a lot of problematic fascist ideology (not surprising, considering that the author was a problematic fascist who shared both the good and bad qualities of Martin Heidegger). But it's not nearly as insane as it should be, at least relative to how we view its author. I can easily imagine a distant, dystopic future where it's considered the most prescient work of the 1990s.

As I read it now, three things strike me:

1. As it turns out, I am nothing like Kaczynski. In fact, I represent precisely what the Unabomber hates about humanity, as do most of the people who embody the target audience for this book.
2. Just about everyone who hasn't read *Industrial Society and Its Future* assumes it's a screed against technology, and sometimes it is. But it's mostly about the concept of a specific type of political freedom. Kaczynski is not interested in *feeling* free; Kaczynski is interested in a kind of freedom most people don't even realize is possible.
3. *Industrial Society and Its Future* was written by an isolated man living in a cabin without electricity during the 1980s and early '90s.

The text mentions the Internet several times, but one has to assume it was impossible for him to fully understand what the Internet would eventually become. Yet Kaczynski's core ideas about this specific technology are competitive with those of virtually everyone who's written about it since. He couldn't have fully understood what he was writing about and his language is often unsophisticated, but his sense of the web's inherent problems is natural and spot-on.

He was a bad person, but sometimes he was right.

2 The psychological profile of Ted Kaczynski reads like an origin story for someone who'd eventually become one of the Watchmen: Born in 1942, he's smart and weird. His IQ in fifth grade is 167. He's so smart that they skip him from sixth to seventh grade, and this ruins his life. He's teased constantly and has no friends. The socially retarded Kaczynski is accepted into Harvard at the age of sixteen and immediately excels at math, specializing in the field of geometric function theory. But something unorthodox happens while at Harvard—he takes part in a psychological experiment that's based on deception. Participants in the study believe they are being asked to debate philosophy with a collegiate peer, but the “peer” is actually a lawyer whose sole purpose is to aggravate and attack the unwitting applicant; Ted has unknowingly volunteered for a stress test. When the reality of the hoax is eventually explained to Kaczynski, he feels betrayed and outraged. This experience seems to change him. At his eventual trial, Kaczynski's lawyers will argue that this was where his hatred of authority truly began.

After earning a PhD from the University of Michigan, Kaczynski takes a post as an assistant mathematics professor at the University of California–Berkley in 1967, but he leaves the position in '69 without explanation. Two years later he starts living in a remote Montana cabin; six years after that he starts mailing homemade bombs to people. Because his early targets were either universities (*UN*) or airlines (*A*), authorities dubbed him the Unabomber. Part of the reason he was able to avoid apprehension for almost twenty years was his ability to embed the bombs with misleading clues: He kept using the code word *wood* in the missives, sometimes inscribed the random initials “FC,” and once included a note to a nonexistent person named “Wu.” Since these were the only clues the FBI had, they always pursued them to the ultimate extreme (which was always a dead end). Our

only visual aid was the most recognizable police sketch of the twentieth century, a preposterously generic image that suggested (a) the Unabomber didn't like the sun in his eyes and (b) he owned at least one hooded sweatshirt. Had Kaczynski's own brother² not figured out who the Unabomber was after the manifesto's publication, it's plausible that Kaczynski would never have been caught.

Now, before I go any further, I want to stress that I am not a "fan" of the Unabomber. None of the bombs he sent were justified. Every person who was hurt was hurt for no valid reason. But I still want to think about the reasons why he sent those bombs, and those reasons are found in *Industrial Society and Its Future*. He became a domestic terrorist so that people would consume this document. In and of itself, that relationship is immaterial (a manifesto doesn't become important just because its writer is merciless and desperate). The main thing one can deduce from Kaczynski's willingness to kill strangers is that he is an egotist. That said, the fact that a document's creator is an egocentric murderer does not preclude the work from being worthwhile (Phil Spector shot a woman in the face, but that doesn't make the harmonies on "Be My Baby" any less beautiful). The fact that Kaczynski has a deeply damaged psyche doesn't mitigate its value at all: Not all crazy people are brilliant, but almost all brilliant people are crazy.

3 Cultural criticism is a temporary kind of art. Works of this variety sometimes experience massive spikes in popularity at the time of their release, but the shelf life is short. If a piece of cultural criticism truly succeeds, its ideas and theories are completely absorbed by mainstream society (which means that the book itself becomes unnecessary). This has happened with lots of influential books from the past forty years that are now rarely purchased by new audiences—*The Closing of the American Mind*, *Within the Context of No Context*, the novel *Generation X*, and other works in this vein. One of the most fascinating examples of the phenomenon is Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. Part of what makes this book so entertaining is the laughable impossibility of its nonmetaphorical goal: The author seems to have written this book with the hope that everyone in America would read it, agree with all its points, and literally destroy their television sets with sledgehammers. This did not happen. But there are still tons of great ideas in *Four Arguments*, and it's amazing that Mander came to these realizations in

1978, before the advent of cable or the inception of the web. When Mander rails against his version of mediated culture, he's really just railing against three networks and PBS. But three channels and *Sesame Street* were all he needed to see the truth, which is this—TV takes away our freedom to have whatever thoughts we want. So do photographs, movies, and the Internet. They provide us with more intellectual stimuli, but they construct a lower, harder intellectual ceiling. The first time someone tries to convince you to take mushrooms, they often argue that mushrooms “allow you to think whatever thoughts you want.” This sentiment makes no sense to anyone who has not taken psychedelic drugs, because everyone likes to assume we already have the freedom to think whatever we please. But this is not true. Certain drug experiences *do* expand a person's freedom of thought, in the same way that certain media experiences make that freedom smaller.

On page 243 of *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Mander lists a variety of scenarios and asks the reader to imagine them inside their own mind. These are things like “life in an Eskimo village,” “a preoperation conversation among doctors,” “the Old South,” “the flight of Amelia Earhart,” or “the Old West.” This is very easy to do, and you can do it right now—pick any one of those situations and watch it inside your mind's eye. But once you've done so, consider what Mander says about the process:

It is extremely likely that you have experienced no more than one or two of [these situations] personally. Obviously, these images [inside your head] were either out of your own imagination or else they were from the media. Can you identify which was which?

In all likelihood, *all* of your internal images did (at least partially) originate from television. Your supposedly unique mental picture of a Georgia plantation during the Civil War is just an interpretation of what you unconsciously recall from *Gone With the Wind* or *Roots* (or some other show that used the same set). Mander goes on to make an even more troubling request—he asks the reader to imagine a basketball game. Do that right now. Close your eyes and imagine a basketball game in your head. What did it look like? One can assume that virtually everyone in the United States has attended a live basketball game at some point in his or her life, and almost as many have played in a basketball game for real (at least for

five minutes at recess in sixth grade). I played organized basketball for thirteen years. So why is my first mental image of a basketball game a moment from game four of a Celtics-Lakers championship series I saw on CBS in 1984? Why is *that* my immediate, galvanized definition of a sport I actively played?

It's because we really can't differentiate between real and unreal images. We can describe the difference, but we can't manage it.

Decadent French critic Charles Baudelaire made a comparable point about photography way back in 1859, but the process is accelerated a thousand fold when applied to images that move and talk and morph. Mander's point is that technology evolves much faster than we do physically or mentally, and the consequence is that vague sense of alienation expressed by Thom Yorke on *OK Computer*. Humans have existed for 130,000 years. *The Great Train Robbery* was made in 1903. For roughly 129,900 years, any moving image a human saw was actually real. It was *there*, right in front of you. If a man in 1850 saw a train chugging toward his face, it was actually a train. For 129,900 years, we were conditioned to understand that seeing something in motion had a specific meaning. But that understanding no longer exists; today, we constantly "see things" that aren't actually there. Intellectually, we know that there's a difference between *The Great Train Robbery* and a real train. Intellectually, we know there is a difference between a living person and a Facebook profile. We know that *The Sopranos* and our own life are different. But is there any possible way that 129,900 years of psychological evolution can be altered within the span of a single century? Is it any wonder that people feel paradoxically alienated by the mechanical devices they love?

We do not have the freedom to think whatever we want. We don't. And until we accept that, it's useless to think about anything else.

2A I don't expect consumers of this book to read *Industrial Society and Its Future*, or even to spend more than two or three minutes scanning it on Wikipedia. I know how this works. But just to make things a little more collectively cogent, here is the document for Matt Damon fans who prefer the editing of *The Bourne Ultimatum* to Gerry:

1. The first line of the introduction is "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race." The

important thing to note here is that the words *Industrial Revolution* have been capitalized. Kaczynski's complaint with society starts around the year 1760, almost two centuries before he was born.

2. The next sections discuss "the psychology of modern leftism," which is an attack on a certain kind of person—not necessarily a *political* liberal, but people whose worldview and morality are marked by "feelings of inferiority" with characteristic traits that include "low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, depressive tendencies, defeatism, guilt, self-hatred, etc."
3. A big chunk of the manifesto is about the desire for power and socialization. He argues that modern people are so obsessed with socialization that they deceive themselves about everything—about what they feel, why they do things, or what their true morals are. It's weird to take moral advice from a guy who sent bombs to strangers, but his thoughts are not invalid: Basically, the Unabomber believes modern people have no idea how they're supposed to think or feel, so they convince themselves to care about whatever rules the rest of society seems to require. It's something of a rudimentary loop—people conform to the status quo because the status quo validates the conformity they elected to adopt.
4. Kaczynski was obsessed with autonomy. "For most people, it is through the power process—having a goal, making an *autonomous* effort and attaining the goal—that self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of power are acquired." This is the root of his hatred of technology—he could not be a singular individual if his livelihood was dependent on machines.
5. In a section titled "Sources of Social Problems," he argues that conservatives are "fools" for complaining about the deterioration of values while supporting economic and technological growth. This is a key point for Kaczynski. He sees these things as interrelated.
6. Science, the Unabomber argues, is the ultimate "surrogate activity." This is the term Kaczynski uses in reference to pursuits that give people an artificial goal and a constructed meaning to their lives. As applied to the Internet, the argument is almost unassailable.

Now, here are the three points that matter most:

7. The manifesto outlines five principles of history. Only the fifth principle is important: “People do not consciously and rationally choose the form of their society. Societies develop through processes of social evolution that are not under rational human control.”
8. Technology is a more powerful force than the desire for freedom.
9. We cannot separate good technology from bad technology.

If you mention these last three statements to most normal people, they will say number 7 is usually true, number 8 is possibly true, and number 9 is probably false. But they’re all equally accurate.

3A While writing this essay I read Lee Siegel’s *Against the Machine*, a 2008 book subtitled *Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob*. One of the author’s central thoughts involves the way the Internet has negatively transformed people’s sense of self and about how widespread anonymity on the Internet has inadvertently lowered the level of American discourse. These are good points. But *Against the Machine* is ultimately an unreliable book, simply because of Siegel’s motive for writing it.

The author describes all this in the book’s introduction: In 2006, Siegel wrote a piece for *The New Republic* that questioned Jon Stewart. When the article was posted online, dozens of people hurled childish, ad hominem insults against Siegel in the comment section—a phenomenon that now happens when almost anything interesting is published in public. But Siegel responded in the worst possible way. He created a fake profile for himself and wrote self-aggrandizing attacks directed at his critics. (He injected insights like “You couldn’t tie Siegel’s shoelaces.”) Siegel was suspended by *The New Republic* for doing this. According to the author, the debacle prompted him “to write the book on Web culture that I’d long wanted to write,” which turned into *Against the Machine*.

I believe Siegel is lying, at least to himself. I don’t think *Against the Machine* was the book he’d been waiting his entire career to publish. The whole tome reads like an ill-advised reaction to the controversy on *The New Republic*’s website. He wasn’t against “the machine” until it personally wounded him.³ Had the commentators only praised his arguments, it’s easy to imagine Siegel writing a completely different book about how the Internet is saving the American intellectual. This is why reading about the

social meaning of technology tends to go nowhere: Such works are almost always written for wholly personal reasons. The only people who think the Internet is a calamity are people whose lives have been hurt by it; the only people who insist the Internet is wonderful are those who need it to give their life meaning. Web philosophy is an idiom devoid of objective, impersonal thinking. In 2008, the *Columbia Review of Journalism* interviewed a man named Clay Shirky about the pitfalls of modern Luddism and the meaning of information overload. Shirky teaches interactive telecommunication at NYU and wrote a book about social media called *Here Comes Everybody*. In the *CRJ* interview, Shirky said things like “I’m just so impatient with the argument that the world should be slowed down to help people who aren’t smart enough to understand what’s going on.” This is the message net-obsessed people always deliver; the condescending phrase most uttered by frothing New Media advocates is “You just don’t get it.” The truth of the matter is that Clay Shirky *must* argue that the Internet is having a positive effect—it’s the only reason he’s publicly essential. Prior to 1996, no one wanted to interview Clay Shirky about anything. He used to be just another unassuming intellectual (of which the world has many). Now he’s the prophet for a revolution. By promoting online media, he promotes himself. And this is not uncommon—the reason so many bloggers fixated on the TV show *Gossip Girl* was because inflating the import of *Gossip Girl* amplified the significance of blogging itself. The degree to which anyone values the Internet is proportional to how valuable the Internet makes that person.

This is why *Industrial Society and Its Future* feels so different. Unlike just about everyone else who writes about technology, Kaczynski doesn’t have a horse in the race. Had he elected to embrace the trappings of the modern age, there is no doubt he could have been wildly successful—I suspect he could have been one of the Internet’s architects, were that what he wanted. It wasn’t that he was frozen out or ostracized—he *chose* not to be involved. Moreover, he was ultimately able to live separate from the electronic age as successfully as any American could expect; it wasn’t tangibly impeding him at all, unless you count the occasional airplane coasting twenty-eight thousand feet above his head. Technology wasn’t damaging him in any real way. Were he not a sociopath, he could have stayed in his cabin and avoided the advancing world forever. He made things personal by mailing bombs to strangers, but his complaints were not

about himself or his career or what anonymous cretins might be saying about him on *The New Republic's* website. His ideas were too radical, but at least they were his own.

2B The Unabomber writes that society evolves irrationally, which is probably how he justified mailing people bombs. But what would a rational society look like? He never explains that part.

When it's warm out, I like to sit inside air-conditioned rooms. This feels rational to me. It seems rational to want to be comfortable. But is it rational to expect to be cool when the outside temperature is 95 degrees? I suppose it isn't. But why would it be irrational to build and use a machine that makes things cooler? Here again, that seems rational.

Yet what am I giving up in order to have a 70-degree living room in July?

Nothing that's particularly important to me.

For the air conditioner to work, I need to live in a building that has electricity, so I have to be connected to the rest of society. That's fine. That's no problem. Of course, to be accepted by that society, I have to accept the rules and laws of community living. That's fine, too. Now, to thrive and flourish and afford my electric bill, I will also have to earn money. But that's okay—most jobs are social and many are enriching and unnecessary. However, the only way to earn money is to do something (or provide something) that is valued by other people. And since I don't get to decide what other people value, what I do to make a living is not really my decision. So—in order to have air-conditioning—I will agree to live in a specific place with other people, following whatever rules happen to exist there, all while working at a job that was constructed by someone else for their benefit.

In order to have a 70-degree living room, I give up almost *everything*.

Yet nothing that's particularly important to me.

When Kaczynski wrote, "Technology is a more powerful social force than the aspiration for freedom," I assume this is what he meant.

3B When I was younger, people would often ask what my political affiliations were. These days, I find that people will just tell me what they assume my political affiliations *must be*, usually based on something I've published that wasn't remotely political. Everyone I've met in New York or

California tells me I'm conservative. The rest of America tells me that I'm almost comically liberal. I feel good about this. I enjoy writing about my own life, but I don't like people knowing anything about me.

However, the Unabomber knows me. He knows me better than I know myself.

I would never have guessed that I am a Modern Leftist; I've never been involved in a Parisian riot or aligned myself with a black bloc or campaigned for Russ Feingold. But I embody at least half of Kaczynski's Modern Leftist criteria. Here (once again) are the qualities he assigns to the Modern Leftist: "feelings of inferiority," "low self-esteem," "feelings of powerlessness," "depressive tendencies," "defeatism," "guilt," and "self-hatred." Granted, some of these traits are amorphous. *Low self-esteem* is a totally meaningless designation, simply because there's no extension of human behavior that doesn't qualify. If you have no self-confidence, you are believed to possess low self-esteem; if you have an abundance of self-confidence, it's assumed your arrogance is an attempt to overcompensate for a lack of self-esteem. I don't think I've ever met a person with the "correct" level of self-esteem. But some of Ted's other designations are more telling. To me, it seems naïve *not* to feel as though one is powerless, a sentiment that probably proves that I also possess a feeling of inferiority. I'm depressed a lot, usually for no reason (although sometimes I'm just hungry, which often feels the same). I'm extremely defeatist about anything that doesn't come easily to me. I don't have much guilt (in fact, my wife claims I don't have enough), but I do hate myself. In fact, I can't relate to people who *don't* hate themselves, which might mean I have low self-esteem (or, I suppose, the complete opposite). Another trait of the Modern Leftist (according to Ted) is someone "interpret[ing] as derogatory almost anything that is said about him." I understand how this feels, too: I always suspect people are saying negative things about me, even if they are being friendly and flattering. But I'm sure I make other people feel this way, too. For years, I tried to avoid overused words like *nice* and *cool* whenever I made small talk. I'd always try to offhandedly compliment strangers with less predictable phrases, like "Wow! That's an unorthodox haircut." As it turns out, most people—and especially most women—hate this. They typically respond by hiding in the bathroom, trying to get drunk, or (on one occasion) attempting to get drunk *in* the bathroom. This used to bother me. But now I realize I was simply partying with too many Modern Leftists. I

should have spent more of my social time with Postmodern Leftists; they never care what you say to them, as long as you don't criticize architecture or Girl Talk.

My point, basically, is this: Even though I am defending several of Ted Kaczynski's ideas, I'm the kind of human he hates most. It was people like me who made him mail bombs to university professors he'd never meet. I suspect that if you went to his supermax prison cell in Colorado and asked Kaczynski who most represents the problems he outlines in his manifesto, he would say something along the lines of "People who know the truth, yet still refuse to accept what they know to be true." That's who I am (and—if you're reading this—you probably are, too). Even though he deserves to die in jail, Kaczynski's thesis is correct: Technology is bad for civilization. We are living in a manner that is unnatural. We are latently enslaved by our own ingenuity, and we have unknowingly constructed a simulated world. The benefits of technology are easy to point out (medicine, transportation, the ability to send and receive text messages during Michael Jackson's televised funeral), but they do not compensate for the overall loss of humanity that is its inevitable consequence. As a species, we have never been less human than we are right now.

And that (evidently) is what I want.

I *must* want it. It *must* be my desire, because I would do nothing to change the world's relationship to technology even if I could. My existence is constructed, and it's constructed through the surrogate activity of mainstream popular culture. I understand this. And because I understand this, I could change. I could move to Montana and find Ted's cabin and live there, satisfied in my philosophical rightness. I could go the Christopher McCandless route and shoot a moose for food and self-actualization. But I choose the opposite. Instead of confronting reality and embracing the Experience of Being Alive, I will sit here and read about Animal Collective over the Internet. Again. I will read about Animal Collective *again*. And not because the content is important or amusing or well written, but because the content exists. Reading about Animal Collective has replaced being alive. I aspire to think of myself as an analog person, but I am not. I have been converted to digital without the remastering, and the fidelity is appalling.

A few hours ago, someone asked me if I thought it would be good for the world if the Internet spontaneously went black and never returned. It was a hypothetical, so I said, "Yes." It would be a positive insurrection for the

world. We would have less access to information, but we would not be any less informed about reality. People like to assume the democratization of media is a wonderful concept, but that's only because most Americans are childishly obsessed with the word *democracy*: They want to believe anything becomes better if you make it more democratic. This may be true for governments and birthday parties, but not for everything else. Should we democratize the world's supply of uranium? Should we democratize guns? Should we democratize cocaine?⁴ The Internet is not improving our lives. It's making things (slightly) worse. But because I'm not free—because I am a slave to my own weakness—I can no longer imagine life without it. I love the Internet. *I love the Internet*. And I will probably love whatever technological firebomb comes next. My apologies, Ted. Your thirty-five-thousand-word document makes sense to me, but I cannot be saved. You'll have to blow up my hands.

1. My physical appearance might play a role in this.

2. Kaczynski's brother David deduced that the Unabomber was probably Ted when he noticed that several of Ted's pet phrases were used in the manifesto, most notably the term "cool-headed logicians."

[3](#). I would never argue that Siegel isn't a smart guy, nor would I expect him to take my criticism of his work seriously. However, much of this book is inundated with weirdly transparent explanations for his cultural values. At one point in *Against the Machine*, he attacks Malcolm Gladwell, insisting, "Back in high school, people like him were the reason you drank, brooded over Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, and imagined which celebrated public figures would speak at your (imminent) funeral." I halfway assumed the next sentence was going to be "And you know what else—Gladwell thinks his hair is so cool, but it's totally not."

4. Well, maybe.

About Chuck Klosterman



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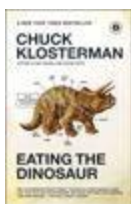
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